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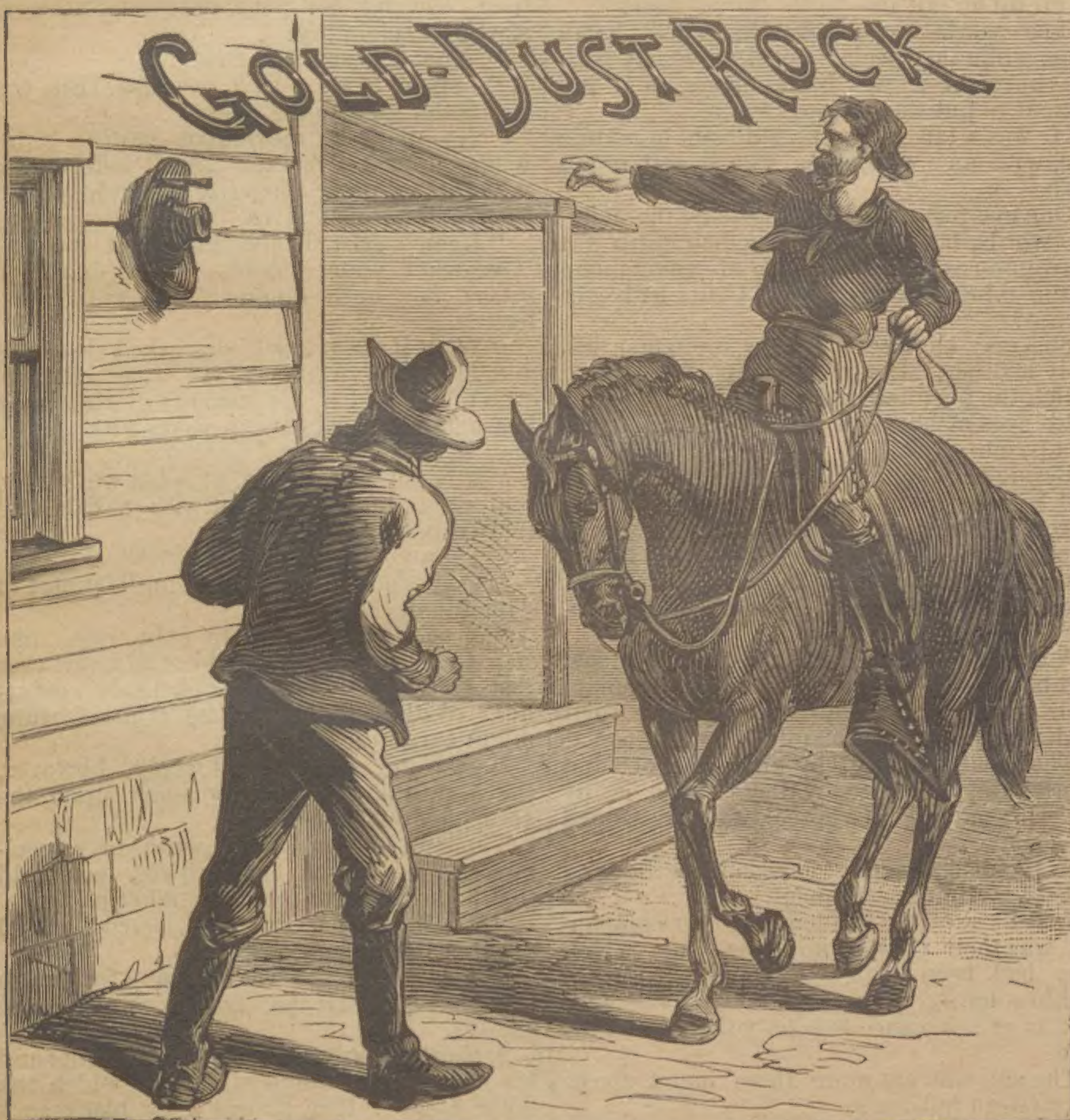
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"CAN YE READ THET SIGN, OLD RED-HEAD BUFFLER? I AM GOLD DUST ROCK, THE WHIRLWIND OF THE MINES!"

Gold Dust Rock,

The Whirlwind of the Mines;

OR,

VELVET HAND, THE SPORT.

BY G. WALDO BROWNE,
AUTHOR OF "THE DREAD RIDER," "DANDY
ROCK, THE MAN FROM TEXAS," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THREE HOURS OF GRACE.

"Look a-hyur, miss, we ain't goin' fer to fool enny more. We'll gi'n ye till sundown to git up an' git in—ye an' the ol' man!"

The words were spoken in a shrill, harsh tone, while the speaker toyed nervously with the butts of a pair of revolvers, as if impatient to put the weapons to use.

He was a tall, burly-formed man, in middle life, with an evil-looking visage and rough garb.

One eye was closed as he uttered the ominous words, but the other blood-shot orb was fixed upon as fair a specimen of womanhood as the miners of Driftwood Claim had ever seen.

She may have seen twenty summers, possibly another. Her beauty was of that type which the poet delights to idolize: hair of gold, eyes of blue and skin as soft and clear as a peach.

Beside her stood, or rather reclined, for he had fallen upon a bench overcome with the terror of their situation, an old man with flowing gray locks and cadaverous countenance, the tears streaming down his sunken cheeks and his hands clasped closely together.

A dozen or so of coarsely-dressed, bronzed and bearded men surrounded the spokesman, their gaze turning alternately from their leader to the helpless couple.

The scene was a slight eminence of land overlooking a rugged valley walled in by towering mountains whose peaks were capped with snow.

In the distance could be seen the straggling huts of a mining settlement.

Just back of the maiden and her companion was their rude cabin home, from which they had been called to meet the wild-looking horde menacing their lives with threats of vengeance to satisfy their greed for gain.

The sun was not more three hours above the western horizon.

"Kem, why don't ye speak?" gritted the ruffian after waiting a minute for her reply.

"What do you mean by this threat, Red

Bivens?" she cried. "We have never wronged you. Why not leave grandfather and I in peace!"

"'Pears to me ye are mighty innercent!" sneered the wretch. "W'ot did ye send down to Drytown fer a squad o' men to kem up hyar fer ef ye war all squar'! Hey?" and his left eye opened a moment to shut again more closely than ever.

"I merely sent for my brother to come up here. Oh, if he were here you would not dare to threaten us thus."

"Ho! but we didn't wait fer him to poke in his hand. Red Bivens ain't thet kind o' mole. Ye are goin' to leave the valler afore he kems."

"Never!" rung out her clear, ringing tone, causing her poor old grandfather to start up exclaiming:

"What did you say, Ora?"

"I spoke to these men, grandpa. But you had better go into the house."

"No—no," he murmured, casting a bewildered look over the group before him without seeming to realize the deadly peril hanging over their lives.

"Kem," gritted the impatient wretch, "we want your answer. Ef ye decide to git, ye hev until sundown to leave the valler."

"What if we refuse?" she asked slowly.

"Then the worst is yer own. But ye won't," he added, his open eye glaring upon her fiercely. "What can ye do with thet ol' man ag'in' us?"

"It is not a question of what we *can* do but *must* do," she replied with a calmness that surprised even herself.

"Then ye do not mean to git?"

"You said I could have until sunset in which to decide."

She said this hoping to gain time. She was too clear-headed a girl not to know that just then the odds were hopelessly against her. Within the next three hours fortune might turn in her favor.

Before the outlaw could reply, however, the appearance of a new-comer upon the scene delayed his answer.

The man was mounted upon a sorry specimen of a horse, and his garb and looks told that he belonged to the desperado's party.

"Ho, Sam, what new has bu'sted?" called out Red Bivens anxiously.

The other's reply was too long for Ora to hear, but she saw that he was anxious and excited.

A short consultation between the chief and his confederate followed, during which the florid face of Red Bivens grew black as a thunder-cloud.

Finally he turned to the anxious girl.

"I hev fooled with ye too long!" he mut-

tered. "I'm needed below. W'ot are ye goin' to do?"

"I must have time—"

"Bah! I'll know yer answer within three minutes or hev yer lives! W'ot is it?"

The hunted girl looked wildly over the little group before her in the vain hope she might find a sympathizing countenance.

"Oh spare us!" she implored. "You have no right to ask this. Grandfather owns—"

"In this land *might is right*. Kem, yer time's 'most up!"

"Wait till my brother comes. I will do as he—"

"So ye don't 'tend to git!"

"Boys, take 'em both pris'ners."

Quick to do his bidding the others sprung forward, when Ora with a low cry bounded in front of her aged relative.

"Spare him!" she implored.

Unheeding her cries the desperadoes tore her from the old man's side and quickly secured them both.

"Mebbe ye'll feel like leavin' now," said Bivens

For the first time showing resistance the old man cried:

"Harm a hair on her head at the peril of your lives."

"Oh-ho! hear the old fool spout."

"Git a piece of rope, boys, and we'll take the starch out o' him."

The rope was quickly furnished when Red Bivens with his own hand fashioned a running noose at one end.

Then, in spite of Ora's entreaties it was slipped over the old man's head.

"Throw the cord over that limb!" cried Bivens, dragging the captive under a neighboring tree. "We'll see ef they can't be brought to terms."

In vain Ora begged for his life.

Eager to perform, the inhuman work the followers of Red Bivens seized hold of the rope, raising the helpless man up into the air until his toes barely touched the ground.

"Hold him thar a minnit," commanded Bivens, the smile of a fiend upon his repulsive visage.

"Mebbe ye feel like leavin' the valler now, miss?"

"Yes—yes, only spare our lives."

"Ha! ha!" chuckled the other. "I thought I could bring you to terms."

"Spare our lives and we will go. Quick! spare poor grandfather his suffering. You will kill him."

Enjoying her agony the desperado laughed.

"Ye agree to leave the valler afore sundown?"

"Yes—yes. But you are killing him!"

"Ye promise never to come back?" continued the wretch, loth it seemed to end her suspense.

"For his sake any thing."

"Lower the old scamp down," ordered Bivens; "an' let the gal go."

Slowly the old man was relieved from his fearful position; and hardly to be wondered at he sunk upon the earth, apparently lifeless.

With an agonizing cry Ora knelt beside him, to start up a moment after, crying:

"*He is dead—dead!*"

"Oh, he'll kem round all right," said Red Bivens carelessly. "Kem, boys, it's time fer us to go down to the city."

"Member yer promise, gal, fer it 'll cost ye yer life to stay hyer arter sundown."

Ora was too much overcome with her grief to speak, as she still bent over the lifeless form of him who had been her only friend in that wild country.

"Oh, grandpa, speak!" she cried.

The hueless lips did not move; the glassy eyes gave no answering glance to hers.

In *abandon* of grief she threw herself upon the unconscious form.

The outlaws turned away, leaving her there.

How long she was under that fearful stupor, Ora did not realize.

When she at last started up she saw that the sun had sunk behind the mountains.

"How weak I am to give way thus," she murmured. "Poor grandpa! how I shall miss you. Alone, what shall I do? Flee, I suppose. Yes, I must! But I cannot leave you thus. I must prepare a grave for your poor, worn-out body."

Then with the shadows of twilight deepening around her, she hollowed out a grave for the remains, and tenderly placed them therein.

When at last the sad task was over, she brushed the hot, scalding tears from her eyes, saying half-aloud:

"There, grandpa, I have done the best I could for you. In your sleep there is at least peace. What fate has in store for me I dare not anticipate. But I have done with weeping. This day's work has seared my heart. Grandpa, home, peace, fond hopes, farewell."

With a last hurried glance at the deserted cabin, a sad leave-taking of the lonely, unmarked grave, she turned slowly away, to disappear a moment later in the shadows of the growth.

She was fairly gone when two men stole from a thicket near at hand, and cautiously approached the hut.

They were a couple of Red Bivens's men, who had remained in the vicinity to see if

Ora obeyed his command to leave the valley.

Had she ignored his threat their orders had been to capture and put her to death.

"I am glad she's gone," declared the foremost. "It's saved us a heap o' trouble."

"An' thar's no one now to dispute the cap'in's claim to the lead."

"Nary a one. I reckon it's a rich haul."

CHAPTER II.

SOME SURPRISES.

"HOLD up there, driver, if you feel like givin' a pilgrim a lift."

"Snap" Bird, the veteran stager of Alpine county, reined in his nervous team as suddenly as if he had been confronted by a party of road-agents, for to speak the truth even his eagle gaze, which seldom missed an object, had not discovered the tall, lithe form of a man standing under a pine by the roadside.

He uttered a low exclamation of surprise as the stranger stepped into sight, while those in the coach thrust their heads out of the windows, anxious to know what had caused the abrupt halt.

Little wonder if Snap Bird was surprised at the appearance of the new-comer for he had never seen the other's match before.

He was perhaps twenty-five years old, not large in stature but with a frame compactly built.

His countenance was as fair and beautiful almost as a woman's, with eyes of a liquid blue, large and soft, as a fawn's. The finely curved lips, shaded by a graceful mustache of a light hue, disclosed when parted two rows of even, pearly-white teeth.

The most singular thing about the stranger, however, was his dress, which consisted of coat, vest and pantaloons made of the finest velvet. Even his broad-rimmed hat, looped at one side with a gold pin, was made of the same material.

His feet were incased in a pair of close-fitting, patent-leather boots.

His waist was girthed by a wide belt from the gold fringe of which were seen the butts of a pair of revolvers.

"A tenderfoot!" muttered Snap Bird under his breath.

"Will you be kind enough to take me down to Driftwood?" asked the unknown, in a soft, musical voice. "In crossing Spur Ridge my horse made a misstep and broke its leg, so that I am afoot," he explained.

"Climb up hyur!" replied the driver. "Paint yer picter ef ye didn't gi'n me the start. Thought ye war a road-agent, hanged ef I didn't."

"Shake the dust thar, trotters; we hev got

to h'ist our heels right spry ef we want to git to the city afore sundown."

"What! are road-agents so plenty?" asked the stranger, as he seated himself beside the driver, when the lumbering vehicle went thundering on its way.

"Wal, I should smile. They stop us just about every other day regular."

"And this is one of their days?"

"Egactly. Reckon ye never see'd a genuine road-agent, stranger?"

"Not to my knowledge," was the innocent reply. "What does he look like?"

"Oh, he's a cross 'tween a b'ar and a sea-cat," replied Snap Bird, showing his contempt for the other in his looks. "Reckon ye are jist out o' the wash."

"What?"

"Beg yer pardon, stranger; I see'd ye was a tenderfoot. Mebbe ye hev friends in Driftwood."

"I hope so," was the evasive reply. "But look there, how lonesome that cottage appears," pointing to a deserted cabin just back from the road.

"Cottage be hanged!" exclaimed old Bird, with increased disgust. "Thet's a hut, mister."

"But no one lives there?"

"Wal, I should say not. An old chap named Marlot used to live thar with a granddarter. Ye can see his grave just below the cabin. The gal quit these diggin's. Leastways some say so; an' others say she ain't."

"So there's a mystery connected with the old abode; tell us the story as we ride along."

"Tain't much o' a story," replied the driver. "A couple year ago Scott Marlot struck a rich lead just below hyur and buyin' up the claim he began to work it."

"He kem strong-handed he did; but numbers don't alwus count."

"So the claim proved worthless?"

"Who said so? No, siree, it panned out big, and old Marlot was on the high road to fortin, when the queerest of misfortin overtook him."

"The miners were tuk down with the mount'in fever and they nigh 'bout all died. 'Em as didn't left the valler and old Marlot

"The old man war in a tight place. He war all used up and hed no money. He war 'lone, too, 'ceptin' his granddarter, who war as purty es a pictur'."

"Arter a while sum speculator chaps kems 'long, when old Marlot sold 'em the lower eend o' the claim to git the money to run the rest."

"May I be hunged, ef they didn't cheat the old man out'n his money and left him wuss nor he was afore."

"Then thar war a 'spute 'bout th' line,

and the long and short on it was they told him to git.

"In the scrimmage he was knocked under and the gal fled for her life. Since then Red Bivens hes had it all his own way."

"But what became of the girl?" asked his companion, showing considerable interest.

"Thet's the queerest part on it.

"Some stick to it she left these parts; but others are certain she is at the head o' the outlaws who are raisin' the Old Nick just now."

"The first belief seems the most reasonable."

"Mebbe it does to tenderfeet; but I'm the opine she turned road-agent!

"Who are ye, ennyway?"

"Oh, no one in particular," replied the stranger, carelessly.

"Hum, reckon ye'll find a mighty poor showin' down to Driftwood.

"W'at's yer handle, youngster?"

"Oh, I'm generally called the 'Velvet Hand, the Sport.' Down in 'Frisco I got to be known as 'Charley, the Bully of the Bay.' In Sacramento I was the 'Tiger Lily.' You see I have been fortunate in a goodly number of names," and he smiled. "I was christened Fairy Wylde."

"By my thumb, pard, don't know what to make of ye!" blurted out honest Snap Bird. "Ye are either all-fired green, or ye are an old whooper."

"Oh, I'm both!" replied the one in velvet, laconically.

"Hold up thar, driver! We have a leetle business with you!"

Half a dozen horsemen had suddenly dashed into the road, and as many rifles were leveled at Snap Bird and his companion.

"The White Riders!" gasped the first, bringing his team to an abrupt halt.

The road agents were mounted upon milk-white steeds, while they wore over their heads, with capes falling down over their shoulders, bonnets of the same hue. Their faces were concealed by white masks through which gleamed like coals of fire their eyes, lending greater wildness to their weird appearance.

Snap Bird, who had been caught in the same situation before, saw that it was folly to think of offering resistance.

"How are ye loaded to-day?" asked the leader.

"Light—no dust—four pilgrims."

"Look out ye don't fergit sumthin'," warned the outlaw. "Is thar a chap aboard with long hair in mourning?"

Bird shook his head.

"Only an old man and his darter, an' two red-headed chaps."

"A woman—sho! S'pose we take a peep at her," and suiting action to the words he flung open the stage-door to look in upon the terrified passengers.

"Don't harm us and you shall have all we have got!" begged one of them, an old man who was nearest to the outlaw.

"Is it ye hev the darter, old graybeard? Trot her out hyur."

"No, no! you shall not harm her," and the speaker moved in front of the trembling girl, as if to shield her from the gaze as well as the touch of the other.

He was not quick enough, however, to effect his purpose, for the outlaw caught sight of the fair countenance turned anxiously toward him.

"Ho! a beauty!" he exclaimed. "Kem, purty one, show yerself," and he reached boldly into the coach to drag her rudely out before her friend could interpose.

"Hold!" cried her father, fiercely, "let—"

A sharp blow dealt by the outlaw sent him reeling back into the vehicle.

The brave girl improved the opportunity to break from his grasp, and springing one side, defiantly faced him.

"Ha! a veritable tigress—" cried No. 2 of the masked riders, to pause in the midst of his speech as his baleful gaze was fixed upon her.

"Good God! Mary Wilton!" he gasped a moment later.

"Hold there, pard!" as his accomplice started toward her again, "lay a hand upon her at the peril of your life!"

With an oath the outlaw shrunk back.

"These people must not be harmed."

"Fair lady, return to the coach, and have nothing further to fear."

"But what friend have I in such a guise?" she cried, with wonder.

"No matter whom," he replied, turning from her.

"Driver, whip up yer mules; you are at liberty to drive on."

Nothing loth, Snap Bird obeyed, and a moment later the coach was thundering down the rocky roadway.

CHAPTER III.

RIVAL CLAIMANTS.

"So those are the White Riders," said Velvet Hand, as soon as Snap Bird slackened the headlong gait of his horses.

"I reckon; and 'tain't every day we git off so easy."

"It was on account of that girl. One of them seemed to recognize her."

"It's queer."

"Who are your passengers?"

"An old man—her father, and two chaps

from Drytown, surveyors who hev kem up to run the line 'tween Driftwood Claim and Redburn's Purchase, as the next range is called.

"So another party is coming into the valley?"

"I reckon—a man called Mark Redburn.

"The chap thet road-agent was axin' fer, I s'pose to his pard. They call him Gold Dust Rock, I b'lieve, an' he's been 'spected a number o' days.

"But w'ot beats me is, 'em White Riders are alwus axin' fer him. This makes six times they hev called for the chaps with hair in mournin'!

"It looks es ef thar war goin' to be sum blood spilt, else why does 'em chap keep sich a watch?

"I reckon 'twon't do fer 'em to crowd down on Red Bivens much. He's jess ugly 'nough to stand a fight."

"This Bivens claims to own the whole of Driftwood?"

"Yes: an' he is the richest man in Calaveras county."

"I understand, and one who will be likely to defend himself to the bitter end. But what about this Redburn?"

"Ah, thar's 'nother moostery. He has sent word that he owns and 'tends to claim one-half o' Driftwood. Th' chap's to measure off *his* lead ar' in the hearse. An' it's the chap with the hair in mournin', who the White Riders ar' lookin' fer, is his pard. He's been 'spected fer sum time."

"Where is this Redburn?"

"Dunno. He ain't been seen in Driftwood. Oh, I tell ye the town is all stirred up, and Red Bivens wuss nor all others."

"Well, I should think so. But did not you say this Marlot girl had a brother?"

"Not thet I know on. That was a blind got up by her, in *my* opine. Ef thar hed been sich a person, don't it stand to reason thet he'd put in an 'pearance 'fore now?"

"I should say so. But pardon me; if it's not troubling you too much, I should like to get inside the coach. This night air is very damp, and I am afraid it will give me the chills. I am subject to them."

"Whew-w!" exclaimed the driver in evident disgust. "O' course I'll 'commodate ye, Mister Velvet Hand."

"Thank you," replied the other, as he sprung from the box, and a moment later entered the vehicle.

"Wal, wal," muttered Snap Bird, "if *he* don't beat all the tenderfeet I ever see'd. Reckon the boyee 'll hev all the fun thet 'll keep. Git 'long thar, trotters; w'ot with road-agents and tenderfoot we've got s'prisingly behind time."

The Velvet Hand found the occupants of

the stage discussing the attack of the road-agents, and were wondering at their abrupt withdrawal.

"I am sure that I have heard that voice before," Mary Wilton was saying. The entrance of the strange sport, however, changed the current of their conversation while they looked upon him with surprise.

"Hope I don't intrude," he said. "But the night air is so damp that I thought it best to come inside."

"Weak lungs, perhaps?" semi-questioned the old man. "Mine were weak when I lived in the East, but this climate has quite cured me. You haven't been in the country long?"

"Not very many years. Do you live in Driftwood?"

"No; we are strangers in this region."

"Then we ought to be friends, if there's any affinity to come from similar circumstances."

"Just so," nodded Homer Wilton. "You seem like an honest man. What is your name?"

"Wylde, sir—Fairy Wylde."

"Rather odd, I must say. Mr. Wylde, this is my daughter, Mary."

Bowing politely to her the stranger turned to the others, who had remained silent in the corner.

"And these gentlemen?"

"I only know them as fellow-passengers," said Mr. Wilton, seeing that the others did not offer to speak.

"Oh, Mr. Fellows and Mr. Partridges, I am glad to meet you," exclaimed the Velvet Hand, misunderstanding, or at least pretending to, what Homer Wilton had said.

"Our names ain't neither Fellows nor Partridges," growled one of them. "Mine is Sparks—Lemuel Sparks, and I'm a surveyor from Drytown."

"And mine is Hartley Rollins," quickly supplemented his companion.

"Excuse me, gentlemen; the mistake was mine. Sometimes I think I can't hear as well as I used to. You see I accompanied a—one of those mountaineers, I think you call them—on a three days' trip to the uplands, and may I be shot if he didn't make me lie out on the cold, damp ground every blessed night, with only a blanket over me. Ugh! You don't wonder it broke me down? Let's see, I believe you are going to Driftwood?"

"I should like for you to tell us how are we going to help it, when this thundering boat don't stop anywhere else, you blanked fool!" exclaimed Sparks.

"Just so; I see. Do you expect any trouble in running out Mr. Redburn's purchase?"

"Trouble, of course not?"

"I suppose you are expecting Mr. Redburn, at any time?"

"Dunno but he's there now."

"Just so—I see. But who was the fellow the White Riders were inquiring for?"

"Mark Redburn's pard, I s'pose, Gold Dust Rock."

"What! the Whirlwind of the Mines?"

"The same; so you know him?"

"Not quite. He was over to Silver City a few days before I got there; so you see I missed him, or rather he missed me. I hope, however, he will come to Driftwood before I leave. I have an idea I shall like the fellow."

"You will doubtless have the chance to meet him."

"If he don't delay too long in coming. I never stop any great length of time in a place."

"Should judge not," was the laconic reply.

Seeing that the conversation was boring the one from Drytown, Velvet Hand returned to Homer Wilton and his daughter with the question:

"I should think you would have some fears traveling with your daughter thus in these troublesome times, Mr. Wilton. Particularly at Driftwood do I understand that great excitement reigns."

"We never have had any trouble," replied the other, with unfeigned honesty.

"But I am glad we have met you for I know you will befriend us in case we need assistance, which I pray God we may not, for Mary's sake."

"Oh, you can count upon my friendship, such as it is, Mr. Wilton, every time. Will you tarry long in this place?"

"No—that is, I don't know, Mr. Wylde; my errand I don't mind telling you is a strange one. I am in search of a lost son."

Before Velvet Hand could reply the stage came to an abrupt halt.

"Here we are!" cried the bluff tone of Snap Bird. "Driftwood! Pile out here, pilgrims."

CHAPTER X.

TIGER LILY'S VELVET PAW.

DRIFTWOOD was not unlike hundreds of other mining towns to be found at that time in the Land of Gold.

A narrow valley widening to the North and South hemmed in by mountain ranges; a long street lined on either side by rows of miners huts, at this time of the day the scene of life and activity.

The street was filled with hurrying groups of bronzed, bearded and red-shirted men just in from their day's work, while a consider-

able throng of curious spectators belonging to the same class quickly gathered around the stage to see who were its passengers, and it may be to get a bit of news from the upper leads of its driver.

"Five on 'em—all strangers!" muttered a tall, burly-looking miner as the "pilgrims" left the coach.

"An' one on 'em a woman!" exclaimed another.

"Purty as a new painted picter, too!" declared another.

"Look here, driver," called out Velvet Hand, his voice arresting the remarks of the impertinent lookers-on, "where will a fellow find the best accommodations in this romantic-looking—"

"Reckon he can't do no better'n right hyer at the Golden Sheep," replied Snap Bird. "Kettle stews es slick a mess o' grub es enny on 'em—hey, Si?" as a greasy-faced man of middle age whose corporal system had been put up by nature with a liberal hand, particularly the front half, or rather *three-fourths*.

"Yes—yes; come right in, strangers. Old Si Kettle ain't no slouch and he keeps his cattle just as well as he does himself. Haw-haw-haw! no 'fense to the gal."

"By Jove! look at thet chap in velvet!" exclaimed one of the bystanders. "Ain't he a sport though, W'ot d'ye say to him, Tally Ho?" turning to a companion.

"That he'll make sport for the boyees, mark my words. But who's thet ol' man an' the gal?"

"Dunno. I s'pose 'em other chaps are the Drytown surveyors. But I thought Mark Redburn was comin' with 'em."

"So 'twas said. But I told 'em he w'u'dn't dare to kem. Whar's the long-haired Texan who's to turn the town upside down? 'Pears he's missing, too!"

Meanwhile a tall, gaunt miner whom we recognize as Red Bivens is plying Snap Bird with about the same questions, to none of which he gets a satisfactory answer.

Taken all in all the expectant inhabitants of Driftwood have received a disappointment. They had looked forward to an exciting time upon the arrival of Redburn and his party, whereas nothing of the kind had occurred.

The surveyors had asked for a room immediately upon their coming, to which they had gone at once.

Mr. Wilton and his daughter had also sought their rooms with no likelihood of their being seen that evening as they had ordered their supper to be brought to them.

The Velvet Hand, however, remained with the crowd, and he at once began his questioning, asking of this, that and whatever

came under his observation, to the great amusement of the loafers who had gathered in the bar-room to the number of a score.

"Ye mus' hev been a great traveler," declared the Tally Ho man with feigned admiration. "W'ot mought yer sign be, Mister Velvet man?"

"My name? oh I'm ginerally called the Velvet Hand; by some, the Tiger Lily. I like that best, don't you?"

"Dunno; leave off the Tiger an' I sh'u'd think it w'u'd fit bestest."

"Oh, I'm a regular tiger when I'm aroused," was the quick reply, without any show of resentment at the other's thrust.

"Mebbe ye hev used firecrackers in yer life?"

"Oh, yes, when I was a boy."

"Bah, ye are green. I mean mebbe ye can shoot a pop-squirt off."

"Perhaps so," was the vague reply. "I could blow a willow whistle when—"

"Oh, my! ain't he green?" and the other gave the crowd a knowing wink, at which a general laugh followed.

"Mebbe ye don't carry any firearms?"

"Oh, no, not when I'm riding."

"Did ye ever see one?"

"I guess so. My memory hasn't been so good—"

"Git out, greeny; *that's* what I mean," handing him one of his revolvers.

"Jus: so—I see. Is it loaded?"

"Yes; an' for mercy's sake point it the other way!" he cried, as the sport in handling it very gingerly, brought its muzzle to bear upon the miner.

"Will it go off?" a question which was succeeded by a roar of laughter from the onlookers—who were enjoying the scene hugely.

"Let me hev it!" exclaimed Tally Ho, impatiently.

"When I get done looking at it," was the cool, measured reply.

The other stared upon him with amazement, puzzled at the unexpected reply.

"Don't be all night about it, then," he growled, looking very red in the face, as an audible ripple of amusement was heard.

Just how this scene would have ended, it would be hard to tell, had not an unexpected turn in affairs transpired.

Before Velvet Hand could reply, a sharp, piercing cry rung on their ears, and one of the inner doors was thrown violently open, when Mary Wilton appeared upon the scene.

At sight of the crowd she paused.

"Help me—help!" she implored.

The next moment she was seized by strong arms to be pulled fiercely backward, and the door was closed with a slam, her cries still ringing on the air.

Spellbound the crowd gazed upon each other with surprise. We should make one exception. How he reached the spot no one could tell, though some declared that he was there at a single bound. Velvet Hand gained the door, to fling it open quick as a flash.

He was in season to see the girl still struggling in the hold of the enemy.

"Quit that!" cried Wylde, springing forward and with a well directed blow sending the ruffian to the floor.

"Are you hurt, Miss Wilton?" he asked, as he saved her from falling.

Without waiting for her reply he turned to meet the discomfited ruffian who was fast regaining his feet.

He was a burly, ugly-looking fellow, large enough, it seemed, to shoulder the Velvet Sport and carry him off.

"Who struck me?" he bellowed, and then as he saw the Tiger Lily coolly facing him he gave expression to a horrible oath. "I'll fix ye, ye toad-stool!" making a lunge for the imperturbable stranger.

Dexterously throwing up the blow, Velvet Hand placed his small, white fist between the other's eyes with a force that sent him to the floor a second time.

"Perhaps you will learn to be a little more careful before you try it again," he declared with provoking coolness.

By this time others in the bar-room had crowded around.

"Who is it?" asked one. "Gray Ike," replied another; an' it looks as if he had found his— Ha! Ike is on his feet again."

The blood streaming from a gash on his cheek where Velvet Hand's knuckles had broken the skin, the desperado leaned against the wall glaring upon his assailant.

"Perhaps you had better go to your room," said Wylde, to his fair companion. "I'll see that you are not harmed."

"And you?"

"Oh, I am able to look after myself. I shall—"

"Mebbe ye w'u'd like to go," sneered Gray Ike."

"Not half so bad as you would like to have me," retorted the gold sport, sharply.

"Bah! who cares for sich a ninnypoop as ye. Es soon es I git my breath I'll pay you for all ye hev done me."

"And I await your pleasure," was the sarcastic answer.

CHAPTER V.

GUNS.

THE wondering spectators watched the scene with bated breath unable to imagine how it was going to end.

The Velvet Hand being a stranger, of course he had no open friends, though the majority wished to see fair play. He had developed a trait of character which none of them had looked for, and as he stood there so calmly they could not help admiring him. His lithe form was drawn to its full height, his chest expanded, his arched mouth firmly set, and the blue eyes flashed with the fire of darker orbs. He held no weapon in his hand though it was supposed that he still possessed Tally Ho's revolver.

Gray Ike was leaning against the wall fiercely eying him, but, apparently collecting his scattered faculties before renewing the fight.

Mary Wilton had withdrawn to a safe distance, the two surveyors from Drytown and another—a stranger to us—having joined her, all eagerly watching the scene.

"Are ye ready?" gritted Gray Ike at last, showing his yellow, fang-like teeth as he spoke.

"At your pleasure," replied Wylde in his even tone.

"I'll—"

"Hold on, Ike," exclaimed a voice from the crowd, and then Red Bivens pushed his way through the crowd.

"It seems to me ye ar' givin' the galoot all the 'vantage. He has the benefit of the light while ye stan' in the dark. Then, too, ye ain't got elbow room. Why not go out doors whar thar's plenty o' room an' one has no better light than t'other?"

"I w'u'd ef I wan't afeerd the galoot w'u'd run away from me," at which remark the bystanders burst into a peal of laughter.

"I suppose it is safest to run away from a *skunk*," was the cutting retort.

"Use firearms, Ike, an' then ye will be sure of him. Ye ar' a dead shot."

"Mebbe he daresn't," said the ruffian.

"Oh, you will find me the most accommodating of fellows, though I must confess I am not a crack shot."

"Hear him!" cried a voice. "He's back-in' down."

"Oh I know'd he had no sand," declared Red Bivens. "I guess we've seen all the fun we shall see, boys."

Unheeding the words Velvet Hand said to Gray Ike:

"Is it here or out of the house? With weapons or not? Decide quickly for I am impatient to have the affair over."

"Out of doors—with our revolvers," whereupon a rush was made by the spectators for the open air.

"There is a good place just above the Golden Sheep," said Red Bivens, who had taken it upon himself to see the affair

through. "Ye'll get the best light thar. I s'pose the chap in velvet ain't overmuch perticuler."

"Not in the least, sir. As for a weapon—oh, I have a borrowed one here that I think will answer my purpose. No objection to my using it?" turning to Tally Ho.

"I reckon not. But say, Mister Tiger Lily, mebbe ye wou'd like to hev a feller 'bout my build help ye through?"

"No, I thank you, I consider it unlucky to have a second. I never yet missed my man and I don't believe I shall to-night. I am sorry for this poor fellow, but I am sure he will be my sixty-seventh victim. I am always more lucky too on my odd men. Come, I am ready."

The speaker's words may have been a sheer boast, but spoken in that calm, impressive tone of his, boast or no boast they were not without their effect.

Gray Ike trembled as he took the position assigned him, feeling that he had no ordinary person to deal with.

Red Bivens was to give the signal for them to fire.

They were stationed twenty yards apart, and at the word of Bivens they were to advance and fire, keeping up the shooting until one or the other had fallen or their weapons were emptied.

Bivens stood in the doorway of the Golden Sheep, and when the duelists declared that they were ready for action he began to count off the fatal number:

"One—two—three—advance—fire!"

Hardly waiting for the last word the duelists began to advance, weapons in hand, both dodging to and fro as if to escape the other's fire.

Gray Ike rushed forward the fastest, and his revolver spoke first, though it did not stop his antagonist. Again it belched forth its fiery contents, and still unharmed the Velvet Hand came nearer, moving more slowly now. His eye never left the other, and his right hand held firmly the revolver.

"Curse ye!" yelled Gray Ike, "take that!" sending the third shot hurtling past the other's head.

The next instant as he was raising his arm for a fourth shot, Wylde's revolver flashed in the pale moonlight as its ringing report, followed by a sharp cry, rung out.

"I'm shot!" gasped Gray Ike, dropping his weapon and dancing about evidently in great pain.

He was quickly joined by half a dozen of the spectators.

"Oh it's only a trifling injury," said Velvet Hand, carelessly. "I didn't wish to hurt the poor fool more than I could help so I merely broke his wrist. Here is your weapon, sir,"

handing the revolver to Tally Ho. "I tried not to waste any ammunition."

The other took his firearm in silence, unable to understand the strange sport. Gray Ike was wounded as he had said. They began to think they had found no ordinary man to deal with. Red Bivens cast furtive glances toward him.

At this juncture the clatter of horses' hoof-strokes was heard, telling of the rapid approach of a horseman.

In a moment the duelists were forgotten and the crowd turned to await the approach of the rider.

He was coming down the stage road and as he came nearer he seemed to increase his speed.

Then the dark outlines of his figure were discerned and it was seen that there was but one.

"See! what is that white about him?" cried Tally Ho. "My Lord! 'tis one of the White Riders!"

"The White Riders! the White Riders!" chorused the excited throng.

"Shet up yer garble!" growled Red Bivens. "He ain't no White Rider."

An instant later the on-comer dashed up to the spot, reining in his his foam-flecked horse directly in front of Red Bivens.

"Ho, thar! ye stalkin' coyotes, d'ye see us come? Whoa, Bill, old coon, we're to hum."

The speaker was a tall, powerful-framed man in the prime of life, with a flashing, coal-black eye and long, raven hair which streamed out in the wind as he rode.

He bestrode a strong-limbed horse which bore evidence of having come far and fast.

Horse and rider, however, received but a glance as a sight more startling caught their gaze.

Lying across the animal's withers, where it was held by the strong arm of the horseman, lay a form clad in white from head to feet!

Not a man present but knew it was one of the White Riders.

"Is he dead?" asked Si Kettle, pushing his way forward to the spot that he might satisfy himself.

"Some of you take him down," said the rider. "I will leave him in your eare. I toted him along thinkin' some o' you would like a peep at his purty pictur'."

Kettle assisted by others lowered the body to the ground, for the outlaw was dead.

"He's gone under, sure's fate," declared the tavern-keeper. "I reckon he found more'n his match thet time. It's a good thing fer Driftwood, too."

"Who is he?" called out Snap Bird.

"Pull off 'em sheets so we can git a peep at his face."

Doing as the other ordered Kettle uttered a low cry as the pallid countenance of the dead man was disclosed to their wondering gaze.

"It's Long Tim!" exclaimed Snap Bird, in surprise, calling the name of one of the best known miners in Driftwood.

"Long Tim—dead!" shrieked Red Bivens, rushing forward. "Show me the man who killed him."

"Whoop-hooray!" shouted the horseman at this juncture, pulling off his broad-rimmed sombrero and waving it in the air. "Can't ye read letters a mile long? I'm the beaver w'ot killed the chap in ghost duds!"

"An' ye—who are ye?" gasped Red Bivens, as he turned upon the audacious stranger.

"Who am I?" snorted that worthy giving his sombrero a twist which sent it flying against the tavern, and ere it could drop to the ground his long knife followed, pinning it to the wall. "Can you read *thet* sign, old red-headed buffler? I am Gold Dust Rock, the Whirlwind of the Mines!"

CHAPTER VI.

DERRINGER LOGIC.

FOLLOWING the dashing stranger's bold declaration, a silence fell upon the crowd of bronzed, rugged faces and stalwart forms, clad in their semi-civilized garbs. Like a nun discarding her veil, the moon stole from behind a cloud to shed her light with unusual brilliancy upon the wild, weird scene.

There was no more curious, anxious spectator among the throng than Velvet Hand, who stood just apart from the others, gazing intently upon the new-comer.

"So that is the man whom I have to fear above all others," he mused. "He looks like a formidable foe."

"An' ye are Gold Dust Rock, the pard o' Mark Redburn from Drytown?" cried Red Bivens, between his clinched teeth, starting up from the body of his dead friend.

"I have been called by that name sometimes. I s'pose you are Red Bivens who claims the lead?"

"That I do, Rock Whirlwind! An' this man hyur was my pard!"

"Sho! I thought mebbe ye wasn't enny too good for a road-agent."

"Look out," hissed the desperado, "I didn't say that I was a road-agent, nor my pard eyther."

"But it looks mighty curious clus to it—him rigged up in 'em ghost duds an'—"

"Stop!" yelled Bivens, becoming so excited that he opened for a moment his usual

ly closed eye. "I'll hev ye to know that I take none o' yer slang. Mebbe ye'll think best to explain how ye kem hyur with the dead body o' our friend, fer 'member, Long Tim war a friend to every man in this camp, wasn't he, boys?"

"Thet he was!" chorused the bystanders; "an' a truer pard never lived."

"D'ye hear thet?" asked Red Bivens, triumphantly.

A gleam of white teeth through his black mustache was Gold Dust Rock's reply.

"My story ain't much to tell," he said. "I war ridin' 'long comfort'ble as a punkin in a feather-bed when a lot o' 'em White Riders bu'st out onto me. I'll 'low I felt ticklish jiss fer a peaked moment 'cause I ain't over sticky to spooks, an' I thought 'em the ginuine sugar. But I wasn't long in wakin' up to solid facts, an' whippin' out my handy Davids, I let 'em introduce me to 'em road-agents. Great horned cats! ef ye think the fur didn't fly, jiss look in on the next show o' the kind. Ennyway the leetle bed-fellers dusted star-quick—all but this one, an' I took him 'long with me es a sort o' keerd fer me. I thought mebbe ye w'u'd like to see how your neighbors looked."

"Bah!" snorted Red Bivens, hotly, "a likely story. Boys, that chap murdered Long Tim, or I'm a livin' liar!"

"Rope him!"

"Lynch him!"

Some of Bivens's followers had caught up the cue and for a moment it seemed as if the stranger would be torn limb from limb.

With the wild cries ringing on the air Gold Dust Rock slipped from his saddle and standing by the side of his horse, with his left hand resting carelessly on its withers, he coolly faced the excited mob. Not a muscle of his sun-bronzed countenance was seen to quiver, and he seemed as calm as if confronting a circle of friends.

When Red Bivens with an exultant look turned from his ever-ready confederates toward the man whom they had received as a foe, he uttered a sharp cry of horror.

Staring him in the face was the ominous muzzle of Gold Dust Rock's deadly derringer!

"Don't shoot!" gasped the wretch.

"Do you think I killed without good cause the galoot lying thar?"

"I—I don't know!"

"Look out how you ante up, red-headed gopher. Ef you want to pick up the quarrel of others I'm your man, but I want you to do it *now*! W'ot d'ye say?"

"I—I'm not prepared to do it now."

"Now or never! W'ot d'ye say?"

"I'll let it pass, pard; mebbe ye wasn't to blame,

"Look out you don't change your mind, old man. Is there any one else here who wants to fill the shoes o' the dead galoot?"

If they were tbeys were wisely dumb, for of all that motley throng not one stepped forth to accept the challenge.

"Just es I expected," declared Gold Dust Rock; "but ef enny o' you change your mind, only give me proper notice and I'll be on hand like a sprouted melon. Here, where's the chap to look arter my hoss? I'm half froze for grub. Who runs this she-bang?"

"I do; right this way," called out Si Kettle. "Here, Sam, see that Mr. Whirlwind's hoss has all he can eat."

A careful observer might have seen that Gold Dust Rock maintained a close watch over his enemies though he appeared careless enough.

None of the crowd, with two exceptions, followed him into the tavern, however, they remaining around the body of Long Tim discussing the latter's fate.

As Rock entered the bar-room one of its exceptions above mentioned touched him upon the arm.

"What, ho! that you, Sparks?" cried Gold Dust Rock. "I didn't diskiver you. So you hev got here? And the others?"

"Are here. But come to our room; you can have your supper brought up there. The captain wants to talk with you."

"Sho! mebbe I'll j'ine you, ef old pots and kettles here 'll tote me 'long some fodder."

"Oh, yes; oh yes," the tavern-keeper hastened to say, "Go right along, Mister Whirlwind. I'll see you hev some supper soon."

Gold Dust Rock thus followed Sparks up a pair of rickety stairs to a plainly furnished room overhead.

Here Rollins and another were awaiting them. The last was a smooth-faced, rather elegant-looking man, of perhaps thirty. He was dressed with scrupulous neatness and altogether presented a fine appearance. And he was Mark Redburn the new claimant for Driftwood's upper lead. How he came to the Golden Sheep will be explained anon. As the others entered the apartment he started forward to meet Gold Dust Rock with a smile.

"I was afraid you would not be able to get here, my friend. The road-agents seemed particularly anxious to see you, and I have been fearful lest you should fall into their hands."

"Oh, it's a sight easier to set a trap than 'tis to drive the game into it," replied the other, carelessly. "I think I can prove that I'm hyur life size."

"And he brought one of the White Riders with him," added Sparks.

"You don't say; then you met them? Pray be seated—chairs, well, here's a box that'll answer, perhaps. I am anxious to hear of your adventure; then we have business to talk over."

In a few words the Texan related his story, and then asked:

"Now I would know how you came here."

"Oh, I came disguised as an old man with his daughter, looking for a lost son. It's an old game of mine, you know. My sister, Mary, answered for the daughter."

"Is it possible you hev brought her here?" asked Rock, in surprise.

"Yes; I could think of no better course; and she wanted to come. Did I do wrong?"

"It makes one more for us to look after, and the way the dance opens we are likely to hev our hands full to take care o' ourselves, let alone purty women."

"So you think they will fight us? This man, Bivens, as I understand, does not claim to have hold on the upper lead."

"Mebbe not, but he's a desprit coon, and as the stick floats at the start he's got purty much all the gophers here for his backers. We are only four and strangers at that."

"I didn't think the case was so desperate. Do you think they will fight for it?"

"Ef thar's enny show fer 'em. But who's thet chap in velvet? He followed me inter this shebang, and I don't believe his eye left me all the time I was in sight."

"He came down on the stage, making himself exceedingly familiar to every one. I can't see for my life who he is, though I must say he seems about the greenest person I ever saw. He is a tenderfoot with whom we shall have nothing to do."

"Likely 'nough ef I stepped on his feet I should s'pect to find corns."

"What! do you think he is a fighter?"

"Sich galoots pan out sumtimes more'n ye want 'em to. Howsumever, that ain't to—"

A knock at the door interrupted his speech.

CHAPTER VII.

NEW COMPLICATIONS.

"COME in," said Mark Redburn, when, in a moment, the door opened and Si Kettle appeared on the threshold.

"Scuse me, gents, but thar's a chap below as wants to see Mr. Mark Redboy. I told him no sich pilgrim feasted at the Golden Sheep, but he wouldn't take no, but I must

look for you hyur. I—fore tbe land, who are ye, mister?" discovering Redburn, whom, it will be remembered, he had not seen except in his disguise as the old man Wilton.

"I guess I am the man wanted," replied that worthy from Drytown. "But who wants to see me?"

"It's thet chap in velvet. He said thar wasn't enny hurry. But I jess want to know how you came here."

Seeing that he could do no better Redburn explained his appearance, to which the tavern-keeper listened with surprise.

"Wal, wal, I'm beat; so the strange sport war right arter all."

"But how came he to know I was here? Who can he be?"

"I dunno," said Kettle, with a shake of his frowsy head; "only I've done my errand. Hal hyer's yer grub, Mister Whirlwind."

"And while you eat it, Rock, I suppose I might as well go down and see what this stranger wants. I am at a loss to know who he is or what he means."

"Better keep yer eye teeth skinned. The galoot may mean ye mischief."

Wondering what was wanted of him Redburn followed the host down the stairs.

"Ye'll find yer man in the gents' room jess to the right o' the bar whar, ye sec thet open door," said Kettle.

Following the direction indicated Redburn soon entered a small apartment partitioned off from the main room, and which was used as a sort of card room for "gentry" of Driftwood when they wished a quiet game quite by themselves.

In the center of the room was a plain pine table, while drawn out on either side was a row of benches rudely prepared from some dry-goods boxes.

Upon one of these was seated the Velvet Hand, closely scanning a rude map of Driftwood. He looked up with a smile as Redburn entered the room.

"You have come more promptly than I dared expect," he said, in his clear, silvery tone. "Please be seated. It might be well, however, to close the door, as our business need not be every one's."

Redburn obeyed and then as he sunk into a seat opposite the other he exclaimed:

"Who are you who have discovered my presence here? I am not in the habit of humoring the whim of every stranger I meet."

"Pardon me for my impoliteness in not sending a card, but the truth is I have none. My name I think you have heard. It was mentioned on the coach— Oh, do not start. I saw through your disguise at the time."

Redburn colored to his temples, though he tried to appear calm.

"You have the advantage of me; I cannot see through yours."

"What need you should when I wear none? I was not afraid to come here in my true character. But as my name has seemed to slip your memory I will be kind enough to repeat it—Fairy Wylde."

"And if that is all you have to say to me I will return to my room, Mr. Wylde."

The other smiled, disclosing two rows of even, pearly-white teeth. Now that he had better opportunity to study his features Redburn saw that the young man was very handsome, with his fair skin, pleasant blue eyes and glossy hair. His hand too, was small, shapely and white, showing that it was unused to toil. The natty velvet suit fitted perfectly his slender, well-rounded figure. There was nothing to denote unusual physical strength or a quarrelsome nature in his appearance, so the speculator from Drytown gathered courage.

"I presume that you feel nothing to fear from this interview, then why your impatience?" and again the white teeth gleamed through the parted mustache.

"I have no time to fool away," he retorted, fast losing his self-possession. "If you have anything to say to me spit it out—if you dare to."

"Oh, I have been simply giving you time to study my features. Now that you have done so, I would ask if you recognize in me any one you have ever met before?"

The speculator shook his head.

"In that case I have the advantage of you—an advantage which I purpose to use, Mark Redburn," speaking each word slowly and distinctly, as if weighing every utterance. "Sit still; I have a question to ask you. How, in the name of justice, came you to own a share in Driftwood claim?"

Had a bolt of lightning rent the table between them in twain the speculator could not have shown greater surprise.

"What business is this of yours?" he cried, as soon as he could find his speech.

"Enough so that I shall demand an answer."

"What if I refuse?"

"I shall then consider you an impostor—one who has usurped another's rights."

"Oh, I can easily answer your question, though I desire to be asked in a respectful manner. I came into possession through Scott Marlot's only grandson Lewis. The old man being dead he naturally came into possession."

"Where is young Marlot now?"

"He is dead. He died only a day after he gave me a deed of the mine."

"Have you that deed?"

"No; I think I could find it,"

"Strange that Lewis Marlot should die so soon after he gave you his rights to this claim. Do you think there was anything in the giving of that deed which caused it?"

For a moment Mark Redburn's countenance was of an ashen hue, but he quickly resumed his wonted composure, though the other's blue eyes seemed to pierce his very soul.

"Sir," he cried hotly, "I will not sit here to be insulted. Good—"

"Stay, Mr. Redburn, I am not through with you yet," and something in the man of velvet's gesture caused him to sink back upon his seat. "Lewis Marlot was not the only heir to this claim, if I have not been wrongly informed."

"Who are you, and by what right do you ask me these questions? I shall decline to answer further questions until you answer mine."

"If you had been better acquainted with Lewis Marlot, you would have no occasion to ask me that. I was his bosom friend, and in behalf of him I am here to-night."

Again Redburn looked surprised.

"So you are another claimant for Driftwood?"

"Not only a claimant, but the rightful owner of all this valley, and whoever possesses it must wrest it from the hand of a dead man."

Mark Redburn was speechless. The shot fell like a thunderbolt at his feet. At last he recovered enough to say:

"Oh, what you say is a waste of breath. Who in this place would for a moment listen to what you have said? I have a deed from the lawful owner to the entire upper lead. Of the lower one I know or care nothing."

"But you have not told me of Lewis Marlot's sister. She owned this claim and not her brother."

"She is dead, too," replied the other, carelessly.

"Ora Marlot dead," and for the first time the Velvet Hand showed surprise.

"I think you understand my words sufficiently for me not to repeat them."

"Granting that she is dead for argument sake, pray how came you by her interest? Did she too give you a deed and then conveniently die?"

Mark Redburn's countenance grew livid now and he moved uneasily.

"She was my wife!" he cried, hoarsely. "There, if I haven't given you sufficient proof of the validity of my claim I am done."

"Ora Marlot your wife?" cried Wylde, growing excited. "Mark Redburn, you are a liar!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A DEEP SCHEME BLASTED.

WITH an oath the other sprung to his feet.

"By heavens!" he cried, "you shall eat those words! I have not come here to be insulted."

"If the truth insults you, then put the coat on. It will be the first time you ever wore it. I repeat that Ora Marlot was not your wife! that you never saw her in your life! that you are a liar, an impostor and a swindler! If I am to eat my words I might as well have a feast while I am about it."

Mark Redburn quivered like a whipped cur.

Mechanically his hand sought his belt, but it lingered there without drawing a weapon.

"Why are you seeking a personal quarrel with me?" he asked at last. "I have not come here to shed blood, but with peaceful intentions. If you persist in your bloody purpose, I have a man up-stairs whom I have hired to do my fighting."

It would be difficult to describe the look upon the handsome countenance of the Velvet Hand.

"So I must add the epithet of coward to the long list I have given," he said. "Were a fight my purpose with you I would have spat in your face. You can go now if you wish. I have learned all I wish to know. But my advice is that you leave Driftwood peacefully alone."

Mark Redburn started toward the door, turning back once as if he would speak, but passing out in silence.

"Bah!" exclaimed the strange sport, toying with his mustache, "I detest the cowardly wretch. And he the husband of Ora Marlot—shades of Ike Graham, what a farce! But now that I have taken the first step in this undertaking I must take another. Red Bivens must be my next man I suppose."

With the soliloquy he rapped smartly on the table with the haft of a knife that he had drawn. In answer to the summons Si Kettle opened the door.

"Look here, my friend," said Wylde, "I wish you would call to this room that red-headed giant who seemed so active when the dead road-agent was brought here by that stranger."

"Bivens—Red Bivens you mean."

"I presume that is his name. Yes; he's the man. Will you send him along? Here's something to pay you for your trouble," throwing the tavern-keeper a gold piece.

"Yes, yes," answered Kettle, his eyes sparkling. "I'll hev him hyur in less'n no time," and he quickly disappeared.

"I have a different man to deal with this time," mused the Velvet Hand, as soon as he

was alone again, when driving the point of the knife deep into the pine wood, he rested one hand upon its handle while he anxiously awaited the coming of the desperado.

Meanwhile in an old shed within gunshot of the Golden Sheep were grouped closely together half a dozen men in closest conversation, a conference that has much to do with the scenes to follow in our story.

All the light that shone in upon the little group was the silvery rays of the moon as they stole in through the cracks and crevices of the old building.

One of these falls aslant the repulsive visage of Red Bivens. Another of the party standing in the range of the moonbeams has a not uncomely face, and he seems still young in years. The remaining four stand in the darkness so that their features are not distinguishable. Red Bivens is speaking:

"So the Texan dog escaped you, Mat?"

"He did an' we c'u'dn't help it. He shot down Tim like a dog."

"Ye ar' a smart set," growled Bivens.

"Oh, thet's all well enough fer ye to say now, but I tell ye he's a holy terror. He's rightly named. He is a whirlwind. But 'tain't enny use to whine until we ar' fairly whipped. O' course we ain't goin' to give up the fight hyur."

"Not much. The first thing for us to do is to get him outer the way. I b'lieve in strikin' when the iron's hot, an' the sooner we git him out o' the way the easier it'll be."

"Em's my sentiments, too."

"And mine," chorused the others.

"Thet bein' settled, how to do it is the next question."

Following this, many and varied plans were offered, all of which were quickly rejected.

"We've got to play a keerful hand," declared the one called Mat. "Now, if we c'u'd get a shot at him on the sly."

"But he don't sleep," broke in the one whose face was revealed by the moonlight. "Now, my idea is to send a decoy who'll call him out. If four or five of us can lie in wait for him somewhere, and have him come along without thinking of danger, we might shoot him before he would dream what was up."

"Just so; but how are we to git him inter the trap?"

"Let one of the boys go up and say that some one is in trouble—a friend of—"

"Bah! ef ye think ye are goin' to trap Gold Dust Rock with enny sich thin game es thet, let us know when ye git him. No; it's got to be one o' 'em deep schemes sich es the Old Nick himself c'u'dn't see through."

"I have it," exclaimed the young man, "and we can kil two birds with one stone."

"Out with it, Hort, and don't keep us in suspense."

"Well, you know what I said about that girl. Now I am bound to have her and I'll give you one-half of my share in this here game if you'll help me capture her."

"Let's see, Hort," broke in Mat, "she was an old flame of yours."

"Yes; and I have sworn that I would be revenged for the way she treated me. Now if she can only be abducted I will look after her then. You know I can take her to the Silver Horseshoe Tavern on Big Luck claim. The owner is an old pal of mine."

"Yes, but what has all that got to do with spin' in Gold Dust Rock? 'Pears to me ye are pickin' plums fer yerself without even holdin' the bush for us."

"Hold on till I'm through. Don't you see the girl belongs to his party and as soon as she is safely in our hands one of you can go up and tell him where she has been taken. He'll bite that bait I'll warrant you. Be sure and start in the direction you want, and then if you do your part Mr. Whirlwind won't trouble us any more."

"Hort has baited the hook!" exclaimed one of the others, while the rest quickly agreed to the plan.

"Mebbe it's bestest," said Red Bivens. "Who of you are goin' to look arter the gal?"

"I will be one," volunteered the author of the scheme, while two of his companions offered to help him.

"That leaves only three," said Bivens; "an' one o' us has got to call out the game, leavin' only two to do the work."

"But those who help me get the girl can join you as soon as she is in my hands; and four of you ought to handle him. Remember, you want to pick him off before he discovers your intentions."

"O course we know *thet* much."

"Then it is all 'greed 'pon. I s'pose we hed better wait an hour or so—"

"Hark! I thought I heard a footstep!" warned Mat. "Ef—"

In the midst of his speech the door opened and a dark form stood in the entrance.

"We've been betrayed!" cried Red Bivens. "Boys—"

"Hold on! don't get 'cited," called out a clear ringing tone. "I've got the drop on you!"

Then as they gazed on the stalwart figure before them, and saw the heavy mass of dark hair glistening in the moonlight, an inkling of the terrible truth began to become apparent to their bewildered minds.

"'Tis Gold Dust Rock!" they gasped in the same breath.

CHAPTER IX.

SIX TO ONE.

"Come like a s'prise party to ye do I?" asked the imperturbable miner with a smile, his derringers still covering the cowering wretches. "I had a presentment that you wanted to see me, so to save ye the trouble o' carryin' off the gal sake o' seein' me, I concluded to gi'n a friendly call. Weren't thet clever?"

Red Bivens ground his teeth with rage. If this man had overheard all of their plans, as he felt certain, then they were in a pretty pickle.

"We have no quarrel with ye."

"Of course not; no one quarrels with me, 'cos I hev sich takin' ways. Jest see how I've took ye all in. If one o' ye should only lift a finger I should shoot you three on my right, or you three on my left. I couldn't help it. My pistols hev a takin' way the same as I hev. Now that we understand the situation what's to be done?"

"Curse ye," roared Red Bivens, "we want yer heart's blood!"

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I should rather not give you that. Any other way I can accommodate you."

The villainous gang were nonplused. As yet only Red Bivens had found his speech.

The moonlight was clear enough for them to see that Gold Dust Rock was deadly in earnest. He covered with his gleaming firearms Red Bivens and Black Mat. The least move on the part of any of them was sure to sign their doom at least. Somehow they must outwit their foe. How?

"Wal, w'ot d'ye want?" growled Black Mat. "We weren't a-harmin' ye."

"No; but es ye seemed to be so pesky anxious to see me and war goin' to put yerself to so much trouble in doin' it, thet I thought mebbe it was my bounden duty to drop in on you. Mebbe I thought more of savin' the gal sich carryin's on. Now that I am hyur, I'm at your service."

Bivens muttered over something under his breath which the other failed to hear.

"Oh, speak right up so a chap can hear. Mebbe it's a favor you want. I'm a mighty accommodatin' coon."

"Ef ye ar' so willin' to 'commode, then jist git out o' Driftwood, an' it'll save us all lots o' trouble."

"Sho! But I'm hired to stay and got my spot in advance."

"Tell yer man ye ar' sick o' yer bargain an'—"

"But I ain't thet kind o' a coon, mister. I hev come to stay a spell."

"We'll see 'bout thet," hissed the wretch.

"Jess give a chap a fair show an' we'll show ye who's who."

"Shol' w'ot sort o' a show d'ye want?"

"An even chance with ye—a shot for a shot. 'Tain't no fair shake to s'prise a lot o' fellows in this way. Injuns do that."

"Jeems Stopple! how you s'prise me. I s'pose if I stand up and let you all pepper at me you'll call *that* fair play."

"We will," chorused the half-dozen. "All we ask is fair play."

"I thought mebbe so. Wal, I'm goin' to give you all the fair play you can ask for. I could drill every man of you where you stand, and if you were in my place I know you would do it, but I'm goin' to give you a show for yourself. 'To-morrow mornin' at sunrise I will meet you muzzle to muzzle, and we'll see who's the best man."

"All of us?" cried Black Mat, with a breath of relief.

"Yes; all of you."

"To onc't?"

"Thet is w'ot I meant."

"Why not try our leetle game *now*?" asked Bivens. "It may be so all on us can't 'tend to it then."

"It makes nary difference to me," replied Gold Dust Rock.

"Then I say have it over with to onc't. W'ot d'ye say, boyees? Mebbe the galoot 'll light out afore sun-up."

"Now—at onc't," cried the desperado's followers.

"Arrange it to suit yourselves," said Rock, indifferently.

"Wal, I p'rose we all go down the street whar we sha'n't 'sturb the folks, an'—"

"Hold on," broke in the Texan, "let me float the sticks. You can go down the street as fur as you like and then turn back; I will keep up this way, and as we come together we can pepper each other to our hearts' content."

"I don't see any objections to that," said Bivens.

"Nor I," declared Mat, quickly supplemented by the others.

"Go ahead," said Bivens.

"Not so fast, old gopher. I may be proper green, but not green enough to 'low you any such a caper. No; go ahead yourself, and remember at the first show of treachery I'll shoot the man on the spot. Pass off out and down the street a few rods. Thar wait till you are all together when you start along."

With the words Gold Dust Rock stepped back from the door, when the others passed out one by one, and slowly moved down the street a short distance where the foremost waited for the others.

The street was quite deserted at the time,

though the flickering lights that came from the irregular rows of miners' huts told that few, if any, had sought rest. Larger and more lurid than the rest was the light that shone from the Golden Sheep.

"Now move down the street," said the Whirlwind of the Mines, "until you have gone beyond the houses, then stop. When you see me toss my sombrero into the air you know that I am ready. Advance upon me and if you six great sports can't ring a cold deal on me I'd go and soak my heads if I were you. Now scat!"

Nothing loth, the half-dozen miners retreated along the crooked street, keeping a sharp lookout for their foe, lest he should shoot them in the back. But Gold Dust Rock was not that sort of a sport. While he reveled in excitement he scorned to take an advantage of any one.

When the last dwelling had been passed he motioned for the others to stop, which they did under the border of the growth that skirted the base of the mountain overhanging the "city."

Standing beneath the shades of the forest they were protected from the gaze of Rock, an advantage which he had seen too late to arrest. On the other hand he stood in plain view, the gold trappings of his dress showing with more than common brilliancy in the clear moonlight. However, as soon as they should advance their forms would be discerned with equal distinctness.

An occasional sound was borne to them from the dwellings, and a loud voice once broke the stillness coming evidently from the tavern.

Gold Dust Rock glanced hastily to the priming of his weapons before he gave the signal for the unequal duel to begin.

When he glanced up to his surprise the others were not in sight!

"Just like the cowardly dogs to vamoose," he muttered, under his breath. "Ha! who comes now?"

Suddenly the sound of hoof-strokes broke upon the still night air. He quickly detected the advance of more than one horse, and the riders were coming at a breakneck speed. Wondering who it could be he drew back from the middle of the street waiting for the horsemen to pass before he should give the signal.

He had not long to wait before half a dozen ghostly figures appeared in view.

They were the White Riders!

What their errand could be, and whither they were bound, Gold Dust Rock had no time to consider.

Like a flash they darted into sight, and a bolt of lightning could scarcely have kept them pace as they swept down the way.

A milk-white steed, with rider whose raiment completely covering his form was of the hue of the driven snow! Six—seven of them Rock counted, and in the twinkling of an eye they had reached him.

The street was too narrow for him to avoid them entirely had he cared to. He remained motionless in his tracks thinking he had enough on hand without placing himself in their way.

The lynx eyes of the ghostly riders, however, discovered him, and a volley of shots whistled around his head.

CHAPTER X.

ROCK IN A TIGHT PLACE.

"LOOK out thar!" thundered Rock, "or somebody'll git hurt!" and aroused by the attack of the others, he discharged his firearms into their midst.

The foremost reeling to and fro in his seat fell forward upon the horse's withers.

The next with a sharp cry threw up his arms and dropped headlong to the earth, his horse keeping madly on with the rest.

"Go it, old spook-shanks!" cried Rock, gazing after the retreating horde with a grim smile upon his bronzed visage. "I reckon my shot was worth all of yours." Then as he recollected the work on his hands, he glanced hurriedly down the street to where he had last seen his enemies.

They were not in sight.

"Mebbe 'em ghost chaps skeered 'em," he muttered, as he quickly recharged his weapons.

When this was done he stationed himself in the center of the street, and pulling his broad-rimmed sombrero from his head flung it high into the air as to signal for the advance of his foes.

No sooner was this done than he sprang nimbly aside just in season to escape a volley of bullets that filled the air where he had stood.

And still no one was in sight.

We cannot imagine how this affair would have ended had not other actors appeared upon the scene.

The thunder of the horses' hoofs and the shots had aroused the loafers at the Golden Sheep when they came rushing to the place.

Gold Dust Rock on the watch for his treacherous enemies, and dodging about to escape their fire, seemed to the new-comers trying to escape them.

"Thar's the chap! Hook onto him!" cried Gray Ike.

Between two fires Rock allowed himself to be taken by the company from the tavern, as the odds were too heavily against him had he desired to resist. But he never for a mo-

ment dreamed of aught than fair play from them.

"What's up?" cried a tall, dark-bearded man, pushing his way through the throng. "What's all this firing mean?"

"I should say the Old Nick's to pay," answered Gray Ike. "But what's this?" as he caught sight of the motionless victim of the Texan's revolver.

"'Tis one of the White Riders!" gasped a bystander. "Is he dead?"

"I should say so."

"Pull off those white duds and let us get a look at him," ordered the dark-bearded man, who was none other than the marshal of Driftwood.

"Certainly, Mr. Dinsmore," answered one of those nearest the prostrate form, and in a moment the disguise of the man was torn off.

To the astonishment of the onlookers they gazed upon the rigid features of one of the best known men in the city.

"'Tis Alex McPherson!" exclaimed the marshal. "Dead, too."

"By the Golden Gate, right ye are, marshal. 'It's Mac, an' dead es a stone, jest! How kem it?"

"So ye hev got him, Cap'n Dinsmore!" panted a voice at the marshal's elbow. "It's a blessed thing ye hev done. How'd ye git him?"

"We found him lying here as you see him now, only he—"

"I don't mean him, Cap, but I mean this holy terror here," pointing to Gold Dust Rock. "Me an' the boys hev had a terrible fracas with him."

The speaker was Red Bivens, and close behind were his confederates.

"What has happened, Bivens? I must confess that I am at a loss to understand," said the marshal.

"Wal, it's been a turrible 'citing time. Ye see, me an' a few o' the boys were in the old store shed a-playin' a friendly game with the papers when 'long kem this long-haired galoot an' bu'sted in onto us swearin' that he'd shoot all on us! He meant it, too, for he had his hands chuck full o' shooters."

"We wa'n't so easily skeered, an' we jiss sailed into 'im, when he took to his heels. Knowin' 'tweren't safe fer him to be round loose, we hitched onter his heels an' away we all went."

"The chase took us 'way to the foot o' the mountain, whar somehow the critter giv us the slip. Then we heerd the shootin' up this way an' we put back. It's the best night's work ye ever did, Cap'n Dinsmore, when ye captured the creetur."

Immediately following the lying speech cheer after cheer rung on the air, and Rock

began to realize the truth of the situation. It was useless for him to deny the story of Red Bivens, so he remained silent.

"I don't understand the meaning of Mac's being in this position. Can he have been one of the White—"

"One of the White Riders?" yelled Red Bivens. "Ye know better nor that, Cap Dinsmore. Mac a road-agent? not much! It's all the doin's o' thet Texan galoot! He killed poor Alex, an' to hide his murder tied 'im up in these duds to make us think he had rubbed out a road-agent. Mac, a road-agent—a robber! He was with us when this galoot found us, wasn't he, boyees?"

"Yes—yes!" they cried together. "Mac was with us!"

"Thar," cried Bivens, triumphantly, "what better proof d'ye want? Don't all thet go to prove what sort of a chap ye hev hitched onto? The rope is too good for 'im!"

"Rope him!"

"Lynch 'im!"

"Shoot the galoot!"

For a time it seemed as if the mob would carry their threat into execution.

As soon as the marshal could make himself heard he silenced the cries.

"We will at least wait until morning," he said.

"Mebbe you'll let this coon heave in a word edgeways," ventured Rock.

"Hear the galoot! Shoot him. He ain't no bizness with a tongue!"

Once more the marshal quieted the excited crowd.

"This is a free country; let the chap talk for himself. His tongue can't hurt us."

"I ain't got much to say. But I want you to know that a party o' them chaps in white uniform have gone up yonder, and if you want to scoop 'em in now's your time. As to shootin' this chap I 'low I did. A lot o' 'em—"

"Gag the galoot!" roared one of Bivens's confederates, at the latter's suggestion, and others took up the cry.

"I suppose your story will keep," said the marshal; "you shall have opportunity to tell it in the morning. Take him down to the caboose, boys, and see that he does not get away."

"Hadn't we better take care o' his irons an' personal property?"

"If he has any weapons about him, remove them of course," replied Dinsmore, turning away.

Gold Dust Rock was quickly relieved not only his of weapons, but whatever else he had about his person, the aforesaid articles being distributed among the searchers.

He was then rudely seized and dragged to

a strangely built building near the front of the Golden Sheep, where he was thrust into an apartment about four by eight with a little bunch of moldy leaves in one corner for a couch.

"Guess we shall be likely to find you here in the morning," declared the leader of the captors, and then the stout door was swung to and one of the men stationed over the place; the others repaired to the Golden Sheep to celebrate over their victory.

"Wal, by Randel Rock," exclaimed the Whirlwind of the mines as he heard his captors leave the building. "I guess this am a purty lively town the way I have been introduced."

CHAPTER XI.

JUDGE LYNCH ON DECK.

THE Velvet Hand waited in vain for the appearance of Red Bivens. Hearing the rumpus in the street he had left the tavern to witness the imprisonment of Gold-dust Rock, when he returned to his room perplexed over the strange turn of affairs.

"He seemed like an honest man, and yet I could see that he was dangerous—dangerous to me at least. It looks as if he were partly out of my path now. I wonder what that precious coward up-stairs will do now. Who will fight his battles? He the husband of Ora Marlot! Well, I suppose I must seek rest. I shall need a clear head and a steady nerve to-morrow. How I dread the day, for it must prove the crisis in my fortunes."

Musing thus the sport sought his couch to rest if not sleep.

Meanwhile Mark Redburn and his associates from Drytown talked late into the night over the unexpected reverses that had befallen them. Gold Dust Rock's capture was a serious misfortune to them, though as yet they looked forward to his release in the morning.

What most troubled the speculator was his meeting with Velvet Hand of which he had only evasively spoken to his companions. The strange man's fearless words puzzled him. Who was the other? What was he in Driftwood for? What did he propose to do? These questions were conundrums he could not solve.

In the bar-room of the Golden Sheep rioting and loud talk were kept up till nearly morning. Red Bivens was nearly crazy with the success that had fallen into his hands, and he got beastly drunk long before the gray light of morning began to show in the east.

Gold Dust Rock was about the coolest one in Driftwood after all. Finding the pile of

leaves in his narrow cell he shook them about somewhat and calmly laid himself down to rest.

It must have been near midnight when he heard some one trying to open the door. Turning over so that he could watch the entrance, he lay unmoved.

Pretty soon the door was pushed cautiously open, when a flash of light from a lantern streamed into the room, and then a man's head appeared in the opening.

"Are ye snoozin'?" he asked, as he glanced quickly in.

"As the painter sleeps," replied Rock. "What d'ye want?"

"Oh, nothin' much. Thought I'd jess peep in on ye an' see thet ye ar' all right. How d'ye like yer bed?"

"I reckon him as he: knocked round es I hev don't mind his bed, wagh!" and Rock closed his eyes, showing that he did not care to continue the talk. But the man seemed loth to go.

"Looks es ef ye'd hev a purty stiff wrastle in the mornin' to prove to the marshal that ye ar' all straight. They are bettin' a hundred to one over at the Gold' Sheep thet ye 'll git roped."

"Tell 'em I'll take ten shares," said the prisoner.

"Ye ar' purty cool. Mebbe ye don't understand the desperateness o' yer posish."

"Oh, I don't care to bother my brain 'bout sich leetle things."

"Say," and the man entered the room and closed the door behind him, "p'r'aps ye'd like to gi'n 'em all the slip. It 'd sp'rise 'em, ye know, an' save ye a sight o' trouble."

"Oh, I never mind sich leetle troubles. I hate to be broken o' my sleep, too."

"But I can fix it so ye can git 'way as slick es taller. They are sure to hang ye!"

"I'll risk it if they will the rope."

"Jess let me tell ye my plan. It's a big idee, I can tell ye. I'm yer friend, ye see; they didn't know it when they put me on guard. O' course I'm takin' some risks, but I don't mind myself when a friend is in the limboes."

"Ye ain't smart ef you don't," grumbled Rock. "No; I guess I'll wait till mornin' and go out of town in style."

Finding that it was useless to argue with the obstinate Texan, the jailer went out closing the door with a slam, muttering to himself:

"The onery cuss don't take the bait. He's a sharp one, an' another o' yer plans hes busted, Red Bivens, though it did look es ef it mought work slick. Once the duffer had got outside the boys layin' in wait c'u'd hev shot 'im es easy es rollin' off a stump, an' thet w'u'd hev saved Judge Lynch a heap o'

trouble. Wal, the boys w'u'd hev lost their fun."

The following day dawned fair and cheerful, the heavens bearing a marked contrast to the countenances of the motley assembly of men gathered in Driftwood. For more reasons than one the rugged faces of the miners were dark and forbidding. Where the day before had been good-natured activity, were now scowls and threats of vengeance. And this great change had been wrought by the coming of the strangers to the city.

First there was the appearance of the surveyors who had been received with distrust. Then the sudden presence of Mark Redburn, whose coming was yet a mystery to nearly all, but whose avowed intentions of seizing one-half of Driftwood claims was on every one's tongue. Velvet Hand had created mingled feelings of enmity, disgust and anxious expectations. Who he was none seemed to care; what he came for a few were eager to solve. Gold-dust Rock had sown broadcast among them rage and excitement. At least he had brought the seed and Red Bivens had looked carefully after the sowing. It had taken root, too, quickly. Two of their best citizens lay dead by the Texan's hand. They had fallen under the guise of outlaws! The discovery of that disgrace only seemed to add to the fires of madness. Enough that they should have been shot down like dogs, but to be branded as road-agents, their most dreaded and hated enemies, was heaping insult upon injury.

"Drag out the long haired galoot," thundered the hoarse-voiced mob. "We'll learn him who runs this camp."

In vain the marshal tried to have the proceedings conducted in an orderly manner.

We said "in vain," with proper consideration, though we much doubt if he had any care as to the doomed man's fate. He had been elected through the efforts of Red Bivens, and the latter virtually ran the camp.

Red Bivens had openly said that Gold Dust Rock should die, and the red-headed giant had never been known to make an idle threat. Thus the result of the work in hand was a foregone conclusion.

The prisoner amid a medley of cries and fierce excitement was dragged before the infuriated throng.

Marshal Dinsmore had mounted a dry-good's box, and in his stentorian voice called for order. He was determined on at least a semblance of a trial.

"Order, boys, order! We ain't wild animals that we are going to tear our man to picces and pick his bones. Even in Driftwood law is not dumb nor justice sleeping.

Let's give the galoot a fair showing. You all know he is charged with killing two of our best citizens. Let him speak for himself."

The marshal had said this without the advice of Bivens, and the latter's face was as dark as a thunder-cloud when he concluded.

"Let 'im speak!" bawled out a brawny miner, a friend of Dinsmore; and others seconded the words.

Half expecting just such a reception, Gold Dust Rock, it must be told, had hoped for a different feeling. He appeared calm enough, however, as he met the wild-eyed crowd, and in his clear, measured tone began to give an account of the previous evening's adventure.

The mob listened in silence as he related his meeting with the road-agents, and the escape with the body of Long Tim on his horse. But when he came to speak of the following events, of the proposed duel between himself and Bivens's gang, loud cries interrupted him, so that when he came to tell of the onset of the White Riders his words were drowned by the uproar.

"Hang him to the highest pine on Silver Mountain!" yelled Gray Ike.

"Lynch him!"

"Hitch him to the heels o' a mule an' set the crittur a-goin' with a red-hot iron."

"Shoot him es full o' holes es a pepper-box!"

It was useless to speak or attempt it in the midst of such outcries.

The marshal saw it and shrunk back.

Gold Dust Rock though a trifle paler than common, met the mob with defiant looks. He saw that his time had come.

"Better let them hev their way, Alex," said Red Bivens to the marshal; "ye see they are mad for the fun."

"Hyar's the rope," roared one of the wild-est. "Git out o' the way thar an' we'll cook the white-livered coyote in a minute!"

CHAPTER XII.

VELVET HAND CHIPS IN.

DURING his adventurous career Gold Dust Rock had been in many tight places where it seemed that he must lose his life, but he never seemed in greater peril. And the worst of it all was the fact that he could not help himself—not even die in an attempt to escape. Bound as he was he could only suffer himself to be dragged to death.

Trembling like an aspen Mark Redburn stood apart from the wild scene a silent witness. He shuddered at the fate of his friend, the more because it left him so helpless.

Sparks and Rollins had not even left the Golden Sheep, not caring to be spectators of the proceedings.

Rock had a friend, however, where no one dreamed, and least of all himself.

"Hold on, there, boys, a moment," called out a clear, musical tone, which acted like magic upon the noisy scene.

The desperadoes starting for the prisoner, stopped in their mad career to glance at the speaker. In an instant every eye in the crowd was fixed upon the audacious inter-loper.

They saw none other than the Velvet Hand, who had unnoticed by any one gained the side of the doomed man, taking up his position on the box vacated by the marshal. He held in either hand a cocked revolver, and there was a deadly earnestness in his mild blue eyes.

"I don't like to interfere in the business of others, but it seems to me, gentlemen, you are rather fast in your proceedings."

"Don't mind him!" cried Red Bivens. "He—"

The ominous muzzle of one of the revolvers staring him in the face checked the bully's words.

"I have the drop on you, Mr. Bivens," said Velvet Hand, sharply. "All that I ask is fair play."

His words fell like oil upon troubled waters. While showing no signs of intimidation he spoke firmly and not overbearingly. There was a confident ring in his tone, too, that was not without its weight.

"Who are you anyway?" exclaimed one of the would-be lynchers.

"Not a friend to the prisoner by any means, but one who simply wants to see justice done. Who of you are willing to take up the cause of the White Riders? If there is a man present let him speak, and I will meet him at ten paces, with any weapons he chooses."

An ominous silence followed the bold speech.

"I had formed a better opinion of you than that you were road-agents and outlaws; and yet you condemn this man because he has shot two of their number—two of your foes!"

The words of Velvet Hand seemed to let in a new light upon their work.

"He is right," exclaimed the marshal.

"More likely he is one o' 'em same White Riders!" snorted Red Bivens, for the time forgetting his peril.

Velvet Hand, however, had already won admirers among the stalwart lookers-on. In fact, there had been those all of the time who needed but a leader to come boldly out for the unfortunate prisoner. Nothing is so

likely to gain supporters in such a crowd as the dashing, reckless course pursued by the Tiger Lily.

Gold Dust Rock looked more surprised than he had at any time.

Red Bivens's words fell unheeded by the better portion of the spectators, though there were those who took up his words until another outbreak seemed imminent.

Coolly Fairy Wylde faced the noisy throng, making no attempt to speak till the outcries had in a measure ceased.

"I know nothing of the road-agents infesting this region," he said; "I know nothing of the men who have been slain; I recognize not one of you present; not even the man whose life I am defending; I came last night a stranger among you. I came on business and not to meddle in your affairs, but I could not stand idly by and see you wrong not only him but yourselves."

"Hear—hear!" cried one of the bystanders. "He's the chap for my money. Hooray for the Velvet Hand!"

"Hooray! 'Rah!" the cries were deafening. Red Bivens turned first red then white. He shook like an aspen and his hands worked convulsively.

"Fools!" he muttered, "fools! When pards are shot down like dogs an' strangers come in an' crow over w'ot has been done ye howl for joy. Ye are blind thet ye can't see through their leetle game. They're some o' the road-agents, mark my words."

"Mr. Bivens, it would serve you better to carry a civil tongue. We are not hoodlums but fair-minded men. If I mistake not you are the wretch who with half a dozen precious followers slew the poor old man who once owned this claim; and that you drove the helpless girl from home and friends. I speak of Scott Marlot and his daughter; of you, Red Bivens and your gang who are to-day the White Riders of Driftwood Rangel"

A leaf wafted from the neighboring forest on the morning breeze fluttered to the earth at his feet as he finished speaking, the sound of its fall audible to the encircling listeners so deep was the silence succeeding the startling speech.

Even Red Bivens was speechless. Instinctively his hand sought the butt of his revolver, but it remained there as the clear words cut the air:

"Hold! I have your life in my hands. Lift a finger if you dare!"

A fearful oath escaped the desperado's lips.

"Shoot him! Dan—"

Spang! A sharp report, and a bullet fired by some one on the outside of the crowd just grazed Velvet Hand's temple to sever a lock of his long, golden hair!

Quickly reaching up his left hand and removing the disengaged lock he held between his fingers in plain sight of all saying:

"That tress belongs to the man who fired that shot; will he come forward and take it?"

A wild shout went up from that throng which grew in volume until the mountains rung with the cheer on cheer. Velvet Hand had scored a point that would not soon be forgotten.

But no man had the courage to step forward and claim that lock of hair.

It would be difficult to describe the looks of Red Bivens and his most faithful adherents. A more crestfallen gang it would be hard to find.

"And now, gentlemen," said Velvet Hand, as the applause subsided, "I am going to put the question fairly to you: Shall the prisoner be allowed his freedom, or—"

"Let him go!" was the almost unanimous cry without waiting for Wylde to finish.

"So say I," added the marshal, and suiting the action to the words, he cut the bonds that bound the prisoner.

"There, Gold Dust Rock, you are a free man."

"An' the wuss cut-up chap thet ye ever clapped peepers on. Ho, maister, ye hev done me the purtiest kind o' favor and ye did it the slickest. Gi'n us yer paw; this coon don't forgit sich doin's as 'em."

"And I don't forget my enemies!" was the clear-cut reply. Then before any one could divine his intentions Wylde spat upon his hand to deal Gold Dust Rock a stinging blow upon the cheek!

The surprise was complete. Rock staggered back in utter amazement. Used to sudden attacks and reverses of fortune of every kind, he was wholly unprepared for this. At first he could not realize that the blow came from him who had just saved his life at such momentous risk to his own.

The spectators were dumb with astonishment. Before any one had recovered from the shock sufficient to move or speak the thundering of heavy carriage wheels was heard coming down the road, and as all turned with wondering looks the Driftwood stage came lumbering into sight.

The horses were plunging madly ahead at the top of their speed.

"'Tis Snap Bird's team; what is he coming back for? And where is he?"

Sure enough, there was no driver upon the seat, and the animals were bounding onward at their own free will.

In a few moments the runaway horses dashed up in front of the Golden Sheep,

where covered with foam and panting for breath they came to a standstill.

The crowd rushed at once to the place to see what had happened.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LOST MAIDEN.

As we have said, the seat usually occupied by Snap Bird was now vacant, and his reins were dragging beneath the horses' feet.

When the bystanders came nearer they discovered the form of a man fallen down against the dashboard.

"'Tis Snap Bird!" exclaimed the one to reach the vehicle first. "An' he is dead!"

True enough the driver was stone dead.

In silence he was lifted out of the coach and laid upon the ground.

"What is that paper in his hand?" asked one; "perhaps it tells something of what has happened."

"Good Heavens! where is Mary?" cried Mark Redburn, appearing upon the scene in an excited manner.

Unheeding him, however, a couple of the miners removed the scrap of paper from the dead man's rigid grasp.

Then, smoothing out the crumpled sheet, one of them read:

"I have been shot by the White Riders; they have carried off the girl."

There was nothing more, but that seemed enough. Snap Bird shot down in cold blood, and Mary Wilton a captive in the murderers' hands.

The stage had left that morning as usual, and Mark Redburn having decided that his sister—half-sister we should say, to be correct—had better not remain in Driftwood, she had started for a friend's in one of the upper towns without dreaming of harm, as the outgoing stage had not previously been molested by the road-agents.

Bitter threats were uttered against the doers of the fearful deeds, for Snap Bird was a favorite with all, and when war is made upon defenseless women, it is apt to arouse men's sterner feelings.

"Come, boys!" cried a young miner, by the name of Robert Hartwell, "this looks as if there was something for us to do. I, for one, move that we hunt the wretches down! The blood of Snap Bird calls for vengeance, and we should be less than humans to allow that poor girl—"

"Lead the way, Bob Hartwell, you'll hev followers enough," shouted one of the on-lookers, and others took up the cry till fully a score signified their willingness to join in the rescue of the maiden.

Mark Redburn, of course, was eager to go with the party and he called upon Gold Dust Rock to accompany them.

"Dunno 'bout it," declared the other; "'pears to me I hev got a leetle stick to chew with this Velvet Hand. I'd like to, I swan."

"Go!" exclaimed Wylde, quickly. "When a woman's life is at stake do not hesitate. You and I can settle our difficulty when you return. I won't run away, I promise you."

"Will you go?" cried Redburn, eagerly.

"By Chimbley Rock, I will. It's my duty! I'm mighty sorry to leave you, Mister Wylde; but as soon as I return I'll see you. The gal, you see—"

"Go, is all I ask," was the impatient rejoinder.

While horses were being brought for the aroused miners to start in pursuit of the marauders, further examination was made of the coach to see if it were not possible to gain some further clew as to the outlaws' attack.

Inside the stage was evidence of a furious struggle, telling that Mary Wilton had resisted with all her strength her capture; but beyond that nothing was ascertained.

It was quite certain, however, that the object of the assailants was the capture of the girl and that when that had been effected they abandoned the stage.

The driver wounded and fast failing in strength had turned his team to drive back to the city with all speed possible.

He had not lived to tell the story, though he bore its evidence in the scrap of paper that with his dying hands he had fastened to his coat.

The miners weren't long in mounting the horses, and with the God-speed of their friends started away, Gold Dust Rock riding at the head.

Red Bivens stayed behind; so did Gray Ike; and the two men were seen going down the street together half an hour later.

The Velvet Hand was another who did not join in the search for the road-agents.

No one thought of work that day, while nearly all the inhabitants of Driftwood congregated in and around the Golden Sheep, anxiously looking for the return of the horsemen with their victims, and in excited tones discussing the events which had crowded so rapidly upon each other during the past twenty-four hours.

Wylde frequently heard his name mentioned by the excited bystanders, and his brave act of the morning was receiving many encomiums of praise, the more gratifying to him as he had come among them a stranger.

Slowly the sun crept up the eastern sky and then down the sloping heavens without

Gold Dust Rock and his party putting in an appearance.

The stage with a new driver and attended with a dozen men as guards had left Driftwood half an hour after they had departed. This escort after going a dozen miles had returned, having met with no cause for alarm.

The non-arrival of the others showed that their search if unavailable was thorough, or it might be they had struck the trail of the foe.

Perhaps the most uneasy men in the city were Sparks and Rollins the surveyors. It seemed to them that they were the object of all eyes and that every movement of theirs was looked upon with suspicion. We are inclined to think that they were more than half right.

Toward night a horseman was seen approaching the Golden Sheep at a smart canter.

"It's one of the boys returning!" exclaimed Si Kettle, but as he came nearer he proved to be a stranger.

"Mebbe he has some message from 'em," said an old grizzly-locked veteran. "He rides es ef he was in dead 'arnest 'bout sumthin'."

Never slackening his headlong gait until reaching the tavern, he reined up his foaming horse in front of the crowd.

He was a young man in a dust-laden garb. Evidently he had ridden far and fast. No one present recognized him.

Without speaking to any one, he ran his eye over the wondering spectators until he had looked every man in the face.

"Can it be I have come so far for nothing?" he exclaimed aloud, a look of disappointment settling upon his countenance.

"Who mought ye want to find, younker?" asked one of the crowd.

"A fellow dressed in a suit of velvet. I was told that I should find him here. I have a message for him, but I was told not to give it to any one else."

"Is he a young chap with long, light hair?"

"Yes; have you seen him? Has he been here?"

"And he is dressed in spink-spunk velvet from heel to head?" continued the questioner, ignoring the other's queries.

"Yes; he has been here then?"

"And he is a clear-cut feller with a grit like an iron bar?"

"Yes, I have a message for him. Is he here?"

"Mebbe ye'll find 'im round 'bout hyur. Say, Jim, hev ye seen the Velvet Hand?"

"I reckon—ho! thar comes the pony."

"Am I the man you want?" called out Wylde, coming out of the Golden Sheep.

"Yes; no doubt about that. Here's a message for you. It must be important, for I was not to give it to any one else," and he held up a slip of paper.

Pushing his way through the jostling crowd, Velvet Hand secured the message, to glance at it with forebodings of evil.

It took him but a moment to read its contents, which ran as follows:

"WING RIDGE TAVERN (the half way house between Golden Chance City and Driftwood).

"FAIRY WYLDE:—

"I am dying. Come to me at once.

"LEWIS MARLOT "

"What does this mean?" asked Velvet Hand. "I left Mr Marlot in Silverdale."

"It seems he got uneasy about you or some one, so he started to come here. But he failed up when he got to Wing Ridge, and couldn't come any further. Will you go back with me?"

"I suppose I must. Let's see, it is a smart twenty five miles."

"Every rod of it. I shall have to get another horse here, for mine is about fagged out."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FORGED LETTER.

"I've got the nag for you, stranger," called out Si Kettle, who was ever on the lookout for a trade. "An' ye can hev him dirt cheap."

"Good!" replied the new-comer, "only I want to turn mine in toward him."

As the other's horse seemed a good one, notwithstanding his present condition, the landlord had no objection to this.

The stranger declared that he must have something for the inner man, after a twenty-five mile ride, which fact Kettle was not disposed to ignore.

While the man was satisfying the cravings of his appetite Velvet Hand found a horse for himself.

The animal was Kettle's own favorite horse which he declared he would not sell, but would let to him for a fair sum.

"Ef I do say it, I s'pose he's the best creetur' in Driftwood," declared Si. "He kan jess out-trot, out-run or out-jump anny piece of hossflesh in Californy. Can't ye, Blackwing?"

As if understanding his master's words the horse laid his head against the landlord's bearded cheek.

"See there, younker. I'll risk ye stealin' Blackwing from me. He'd come back every time. Wouldn't ye, boy?"

A low whinny was given in reply.

By the time Velvet Hand and his compan

ion, who gave his name as Joe Loomis, were ready to start it was nearly sunset and the deepening shadows of the mountains were falling darkly athwart the valley.

"The moon 'll be up in half an hour so ye won't find it so onpleasant a ride," said Kettle. "Ye'll be likely to meet the stage a few miles out."

Without further delay the twain dashed swiftly away, watched out of sight by the curious crowd.

"Pesky strange we don't hear from t'others," exclaimed one of the group. "I tell ye w'ot I b'lieve, Si Kettle, it all kom's o' thet Texan. He's led the boys into some sort o' a trap. It was a contrived plan for him to go," and the speaker shook his gray head, as much as to say that it was a bad move to have let him gone.

"Dunno 'bout thet, Tom, though I must say I'm gittin' a lectle oneasy myself."

Their suspense, however, was near its end, for a few minutes later a squad of horsemen were discovered in the distance coming up at a rapid gallop.

"It's thet long-haired Texan ahead. We shall soon know what they have done."

"But thar's no gal 'mong 'em."

"An' they've been on a fool's errand. Jess es might hev been s'pected."

Even while they were speaking the dust-brown riders rode up and began to dismount.

"Whar's the gal?"

"Dunno," replied Rock, tersely. "We've been on a blind trail."

Then it was told that though they had scoured the country far and near no trace of the road-agents or their victim had been found.

Mark Redburn was nearly frantic, as well he might be, and he blamed himself for bringing his sister into that lawless region.

"Did ye meet the chap in velvet?" asked Kettle.

"W'ot, the Tiger Lily? No."

"And ye kem straight down the road?"

"Wagh, we did. Is the chap gone and I not see'd him?"

"Yes; another chap kem hyur a-tellin' him thet Lewis Marlot war at the Wing Ridge House, and the Velvet Hand started with t'other right off. He rode my Black-wing."

"Lewis Marlot at Wing Ridge?" gasped Redburn. "Impossible—he is dead!"

"That's w'ot the messenger said, and Mr. Wylde 'peared turrible worked up and anxious to git off."

"Lewis Marlot living—at Wing Ridge!" repeated Redburn, showing by his actions that he, too, was in anything but a pleasant state of mind.

"Hark! I hear the stage coming," exclaimed Kettle. "Now we shall hear something of Velvet Hand. The stage must have met him."

The rumbling of the wheels grew plainer, and in a few minutes the lumbering vehicle rolled into sight.

Its appearance was hailed with delight, as many had predicted evil fortunes to it.

"Brad Howe still holds the ribbons. He's got more sand than I give him credit for!" declared one of the bystanders.

"Oh, Brad's an ol' king-pin. Ho, Bradbury, so ye pull the ol' hearse through all straight es a string!"

"Straight as a string, boss."

"Enny road-agents?"

"Nary a 'gent."

"Pilgrims?"

"One; an' I kalkilate he's purty much used up. Hillock there inside, ar' ye kemin' out? We puts up hyar to hay and fodder."

"Is this Driftwood?"

"Wal, 'tis, sure. How ye feel?"

"Glad that I'm to the journey's end," replied the passenger, who appeared in the coach door. "If you will have the kindness to lend a helping hand. You see I am a pretty well used-up man, but I felt obliged to come."

"Here, lean on me," exclaimed Kettle.

"Ye mus' s'cuse me, but ye see we ar' all cut up hyur, an' I swear we don't know nothin'. Reckon ye are a stranger in these diggin's?"

"A stranger? yes, though I ought not to be. I am Lewis Marlot, the grandson of Scott Marlot who owned this claim!"

"Lewis Marlot!" echoed half of those present in genuine surprise.

"Lewis Marlot!" gasped Mark Redburn, and catching sight of the other's face he slunk away as if anxious to escape the newcomer's gaze.

"Lewis Marlot!" repeated honest Si Kettle. Lewis Marlot, may God bless ye, but ye are the man of all others thet we hev wanted to see!"

"And I have wanted to come, but I was not able. I met with an accident that my friends thought had used me up and I was reported dead. I was not able to come, but I thought I must."

"I would like to know if there has been or is now a stranger here—a young man about my age, perhaps not quite as heavy."

"Ye must mean the Velvet Hand. Yes; he was here."

"The Velvet Hand! Did he have any other name? Was he quite tall and slim with light hair?"

"He was; he said his name was Wylde with something else hitched on afore."

"Is he here now?"

"No; an' come to think on't, I'm sartain he's gone to see *ye* now."

"Gone to see me? Where did he expect to meet me?"

"At Wing Ridge. A chap come ridin' up hyar like mad with a message from you sayin' thet ye war dyin' an' wanted to see him at once."

"That is strange, as I sent him no such message."

"But hyur it is," cried Kettle, triumphant ly. "I picked it up whar he dropped it. War goin' to give it to him when he kem back."

"It is a forgery!" said Lewis Marlot, as he glanced at the missive. "I never saw it before."

"Never see'd it afore?" cried Kettle in blank amazement. "I see'd the chap hand it to him an' he's gone off on my best hoss, Blackwing!"

"But look a-hyur, Brad, ye must hev met him. He war ridin' my Blackwing an' thar war another chap on Whitefoot with him."

"I did not meet them," replied the driver, with a shake of the head. "Never see'd a soul arter we left Joe Mix's"

"Never meet him! an' t'others didn't! Wal, I guess I've lost Blackwing this time."

"How long has he been gone?" asked Marlot, anxiously.

"Half an hour, mebbe a little more. It's passin' strange. He seemed honest es annybody."

"Something has befallen him. It must be. Hark! is not that the hockstrokes of a horse?"

Sure enough the sound of a horse approaching at a mad gallop reached their ears.

"P'raps he's cumin' back," said Kettle. "I can swear thet 'em ar' hufstrokes belong to Blackwing, or I'm a dead liar!" he added, exultantly, as the steed came into sight a moment later.

"And he is riderless!" cried Lewis Marlot, in a husky tone.

CHAPTER XV.

THE TRAILERS.

SPELLBOUND the lookers-on saw the horse dash up to its master, and with a shrill snort stop beside him.

His sides reeking with foam were spattered with blood. One of the stirrups was torn from the saddle, and the bridle had been pulled from the animal's head.

"Where is its rider?" was the question uppermost in every mind.

But one answer could be given them:

"He had met the road-agents!"

"I'll bet ye I know the place. I saw the yearth all tored up at Buzzard's Roost, as if a fight had been going on. Then, too, afore I got down thar I see'd a queer sight! A rocket shot up from the cliff above, and may I be blowed ef 'twa'n't answered by another, 'way toward Hogg Mountain, Sez I to myself:

"'Bedad, thar's mischief brewin'!"

"But I driv' through the hull wood an' never heer'd so much as a squirrel."

"Look a-hyur, boyces," cried Gold Dust Rock, advancing. "I read sign slick es a bull's eye. The coyotes hev their den whar I told yer, near Hogg Mount'in."

"An' ye think they'd taken the younker thar?"

"More'n likely; the gal, too."

"You will go to his rescue?" asked Marlot, eagerly. "I wish that I could go, but it is impossible."

"You jess keep cool. Go to his risky? o' course I will. I ain't forgot how the boy pulled me through this mornin', though he insulted me arterwards as no man ever did afore. I ain't a-goin' to put *thet* up ag'in' him till we are square by my payin' my debt. Then if he wants to settle the other, I'm ready, wagh. Gold Dust Rock don't forget his friends, he don't. Who's goin' with him this time?"

Not a man of the assemblage hesitated to step forward.

"Hooray! that means bizness. But ye mustn't all go, so I'll pick out half a dozen o' ye who must start at once."

"But ye 'll hev some grub?" asked Kettle.

"Only w'ot I can take in my fist. Get me a fresh hoss quick. I tell you we ain't enny time to lose."

Nor was there any time lost. In less than five minutes the little band were in the saddle and ready to start.

A hearty godspeed was vouchsafed them, and Lewis Marlot's blessing followed them, and he chafed that he could not go too.

"Don't get oneasy," said Kettle, "the best seven boys in Driftwood hev gone. An' in my opine thet Texan is worth any half-dozen ye can pick."

"God grant their efforts will not be in vain."

Just above the tavern, unobserved by all, Mark Redburn had ridden out to meet the party requesting to join them.

"It may be you will find some trace of poor Mary. I can go with you?"

"In course, slide inter line," answered Gold Dust Rock, and the cavalcade moved on.

No halt was made until they had reached Buzzard's Roost.

It was then past sunset, but the evening

was clear and the full moon lit the earth almost to the brilliancy of day.

The evidence of the fight at that place was seen as Brad Howe had described.

"This am whar they met," affirmed Rock. "Now if we git the range o' Hogg Mountain we can steer directly that way."

Little time was lost before they were once more pushing ahead. Leaving the road they found their progress very much slower, though there was evidence to show that they were not by any means the first horsemen to have gone that way.

"We are on the right trail this time," declared Gold Dust Rock, who seemed to follow the course with the ease of a bloodhound. He had tracked the wily red-men of the plains too often and too far to be at a loss for "sign" now.

Then, too, the party who had preceded them had apparently made no attempt to conceal their flight. Perhaps they had been in too great haste to do so.

After leaving the vicinity of the road the country became less broken, while the forest grew more abundant.

Their progress was a gradual descent—until a wide valley was reached.

Here the growth was so dense that they advanced much slower than formerly. The moon but dimly lit their pathway, while the mountain in the distance looked like a huge shadow.

Finally, Gold Dust Rock motioned a halt.

"It strikes me we hev gone 'bout fur 'nough with the horses. Let's ride down yonder and leave 'em in the thicket."

Accordingly they turned to the right, following down the bank of a small stream until a place was found that suited them for a stopping-place for their horses.

Silently dismounting they led their animals into an inclosure where they would be pretty well hidden from any one in the valley above.

One of their number was then left in charge, while the others again moved on. With more caution now because on foot.

Near the opposite side of the valley under the frowning heights that overhung the lowland Rock again motioned a halt.

"Look thar!" he whispered, pointing ahead.

It was quite dark here so that an object could not ordinarily be distinguished any distance away. They had no trouble, however, in discerning the figure of a man clothed in white moving back and forth among the trees.

"We hev run the varmints to their den," said Gold Dust Rock, grimly. "Their animals are corraled thar or I'm a Greaser."

After watching the man a few minutes the Texan said:

"Ef you'll jess keep still hyur an' I'll show you some fun. Don't move unless you see me motioning for you to join me."

With the words Gold Dust Rock began to advance toward the unsuspecting outlaw as silently as the shadows that fell around him.

Slowly his companions saw him creep upon the unwary sentinel until at last his form faded from sight to mingle with the shadows around him.

Minute after minute dragged itself away and nothing had transpired to break the suspense of their tedious watch.

"Hist! look there!" whispered Bob Hartwell, as a dark figure rose beside the white outlines.

An instant it was seen and then it disappeared, the light one going down with it.

"Rock is at work," said Bob, and with a feeling of intense interest they watched and waited.

Nor long had they to maintain their anxious vigil, when from the spot rose the image in white!

Standing there for a moment as if noting his surroundings, the form moved slowly away toward the base of the mountains.

"Gold Dust Rock has got the wuss of it!" exclaimed one of the miners. "Let's push ahead afore it's too late."

"Better wait a minute," replied Hartwell. "I don't believe Gold Dust Rock has been overpowered so easily. He ain't that kind of a man. He took the other by surprise and of course had him at a disadvantage. If he had needed help he would've called for us. No; I do not believe in hastening the crisis. Give Rock a little more time."

The others assenting they continued their watch for perhaps five minutes longer. It seemed like an age to them, and Bob had hard work to keep his companions still.

"We are losing valuable time," one of them growled.

Not a sound had come from the scene beyond, and it was little wonder they grew nervous.

"Wait till that cloud reaches the moon," said Bob. "If he don't come before—"

"Look thar! one of the White Riders!"

Low cries fell from the lips of all as they saw a figure in white approaching.

"Have your rifles in readiness," resumed Bob.

But as the figure came nearer, however, they recognized the well known features of Gold Dust Rock.

"Ho! boyees," he greeted. "The way is clear for us now. Here, a couple o' you put on these ghost-duds an' kum with me. I've

fixed the guard up yonder so they won't git in our way."

Bob Hartwell and one of the miners donned the disguise of the outlaws, and then under the lead of Gold Dust Rock they started up the valley.

"Their den is jess up yender. We three 'll go ahead, an' the rest on you foller a leetle ways behind so you can come in for the fun."

CHAPTER XVI.

TRAPPED.

LET us see how it has fared with the Velvet Hand whom we have by far too long lost sight of.

Leaving Driftwood in the companionship of Loomis, he rode silently along the mountain road—in silence, for his mind was filled with conflicting emotions.

This unexpected message from Lewis Marlot had completely disarranged his plans, and yet he felt not like unheeding the request.

His companion ever and anon glanced at him with a curious look, doubtless trying to decide in his mind as to what sort of a fellow-traveler he had fallen in with.

"Pon my soul, you are a good thinker," he ventured to say at last. "Five miles and you haven't opened your mouth."

"Pardon me, I know you will under the circumstances," exclaimed Wylde looking up.

Just at that moment the rocket mentioned by the stage-driver shot into the air, seen by the Velvet hand's quick eye.

"Look! what was that?" he cried.

"What was what? I saw nothing."

"A stream of fire shot up from yonder cliff. It was a rocket fired by whom?"

"I give it up. Let's ride on a little faster and we may be in season to discover the party."

Urging their horses forward at a smarter pace they soon reached the shadows of Buzard's Roost height.

Velvet Hand felt positive that he saw a man's form disappear from the rocky crest as they dashed around the bend in the way.

Loomis was not so certain of it though he had been watching the place.

"Hark! I hear horsemen coming. Let us draw out of the road so that we can see them before they can discover us."

Wylde following his example, rode into the edge of the neighboring growth.

Barely had he left the road, when a dozen masked men sprung from the shrubbery and surrounded him.

Before he could strike a blow in self-defense he was dragged from the horse to be beset by his foes.

He made a bold resistance, however, and for a time it seemed he would escape them.

His horse finding himself free, wheeled and with a loud snort galloped back toward the city.

Of course the Velvet Hand soon found himself a prisoner in the hands of the White Riders.

"Ye ar' a good fighter," gritted the chief, "but we war too menny fer ye."

"W'ot are ye goin' to do with him? String him up?"

"Mebbe we hed better not. I reckon the cap'in 'll be 'long soon, an' ye know he's some questions to ax the younker. Come, let's put fer him. 'Pears to me I can hear the stage coming now."

What of Loomis, you may ask. He was looking quietly on at a safe distance. It didn't take Wylde long to decide that he had been easily duped.

One thought gave him hope. He had seen Blackwing start for home, and he realized that it wouldn't be long ere the knowledge of his fate would be known at the city. The horse, however, could not have gone directly back, as we have seen that the stage got to the Golden Sheep first. That he got there shortly after, we know, and his appearance awoke the hesitating minds to a sense of their duties.

Well, the Velvet Hand was borne away in the midst of his captors over the same route followed later by Gold Dust Rock and his companions.

It was after dark, and not much in advance of those who came to his rescue, that Fairy Wylde was brought to the outlaw's mountain retreat.

The entrance to the cavern was quite large, and the opening led to a room where half a hundred of men might have stood or sat with ease.

Three or four rough-looking men in miners' garb were there when our party arrived, and they greeted the appearance of the prisoner with looks of exultation.

"So ye got him?" grunted one.

"Ye bet! Has the cap'n come?"

"No; nor Hort."

"But the gal?"

"Is safe. W'ot are ye goin' to do with this chap?"

"Chuck him in the cell till the Cap comes. S'pose we'll hev the fun of 'tachin' 'im to one of these saplin's outside, es soon es he comes. By the way, this is to be our last night at the old cave hyur."

"Sho!"

"'Tis so, an' I'm glad on't. The Cap wants to git thet chap with the hair in mouruin, an' then he says he's done. He'll 'bout be tickled to death when he finds ye hev got this chap. He wanted 'im bad."

"Wal, chuck 'im in the cell till he kems. I want sum grub bad."

Velvet Hand was dragged into an adjoining underground apartment, where he was left to himself.

He was not left there to be idle long. He had heard enough from the outlaws to know that if he escaped it must be at once.

His hands were lashed behind him, but the bonds were not so straight that he had no hope freeing himself. Accordingly he at once began to tug at them with all his strength.

To his joy the ligatures began to loosen. In a few minutes he would be free. This gave him new strength, and unmindful of the pain it gave him, he worked and twisted them in every way.

At last he had the satisfaction of freeing his arms. To release his feet was an easier task, and in less than five minutes Velvet Hand was a free man, as far as bonds were concerned.

His next thought was as to how he could crawl out of the place without arousing his foes.

The cavern evidently extended a considerable distance into the side of the mountain, but that was of no moment to him. Evidently the only way of exit was through the apartment occupied by the road-agents.

He crawled cautiously forward so that he could look out upon them.

They had built a fire in one of the recesses near the mouth of the cave, and were busily engaged in cooking their supper. One torch stuck in the wall faintly lit the place.

"My time is not yet," he thought; "I must wait until they begin to eat," and he lay perfectly motionless.

Pretty soon the outlaws, having prepared their evening meal, seated themselves squat upon the stone floor to eat.

The fire burned lower, while the single torch in the further quarter of the cavern lit but feebly the darksome place.

A pile of blankets and skins lay upon the side nearest him, and Velvet Hand shaped his course for them.

It was a risky undertaking to attempt to pass the outlaws without being seen; but it was his only chance. He mentally measured the distance to the open air, and if worse came to worse he could make a bold dash for freedom.

A part of them sat with their backs toward him, and all of them were greedily devouring the plain viands, intent upon satisfying the cravings of their hunger.

"Mebbe we oughter call out that cooped chicken," said one.

"I reckon as him who is goin' to kick the tub in less'n an hour moightes well go under with an empty stomach. Meat is too scarce to waste on such short-lived galoots."

"Queer the cap'n don't come."

"Oh, he'll be hyer afore we git through grub, never ye worry."

By this time Wylde had moved the length of his body. A few feet more and he would reach the pile of blankets.

He crouched close to the rocky wall while the outlaws were speaking, expecting every moment he would be discovered. As soon as he dared, he again moved silently forward. A pebble falling from the wall caused him to hold his breath and to pause in his progress.

The outlaws evidently had not heard the sound, for they kept busily at their meal.

At last Velvet Hand reached the pile of blankets, when he judged that half of the distance had been passed over.

"Hark! what was that?" exclaimed one of the men, so sharply that Velvet Hand dropped behind the bundle of skins, expecting he had been seen.

"It is footsteps!" said another of the gang. "Ha! the cap'n is comin'!"

At that moment, to the dismay of Wylde, the burly form of Red Bivens darkened the entrance!

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DENOUEMENT.

VELVET HAND saw that his escape was cut off. He acted upon the first thought that came

into his mind. Springing to his feet he rushed swiftly forward, hoping to dash Red Bivens aside before he could recover from his surprise, and then reaching the open air trust to flight and the darkness to get away.

But his enemy was too quick for him and instead of hurling him aside, Wylde found himself clutched in the other's giant arms.

The outlaws sprung to their feet with amazement as the combatants closed in a hand-to-hand tussle for the mastery. But interlocked as the foes were they could not well interfere.

Of course, Red Bivens was far the stronger of the twain and he was armed, too, but the Velvet Hand was more nimble and his lissom form slipped through the giant's grasp much as an eel squirms in the hand of its captor.

Back and forth, to and fro, they struggled in that deadly embrace, Bivens trying all the time to use his knife.

He had clutched it by the handle when Wylde's right hand closed upon his hairy throat with a grip that took away his breath.

With a mighty effort the big brute threw the Velvet Hand back against the wall, and though the latter was half-stunned by the blow he did not release his hold.

Bivens stumbled as he brought his burly form against the other and with Wylde still clinging to him he fell to the stony floor. The giant lay underneath; the supple Tiger Lily upon his breast.

"Tear him off!" yelled one of the outlaws, as Bivens sputtered and struggled in vain to rise or shake off the death-like gripe laid upon his throat.

At that critical moment new actors appeared upon the scene.

Three figures clothed in white stood at the cavern entrance! Just behind them four others in more civilized attire!

"Ho, thar!" thundered the ringing tone of Gold Dust Rock, "let go, ye red heathen!"

Such a scene as followed!

It didn't last long.

Those with him said that the Whirlwind of the Mines overpowered every man there before they could reach the spot to lend a hand.

Certain it is that he reached the struggling twain in season to save Velvet Hand's life. Red Bivens was hurled back against the cavern wall senseless, as he was in the act of driving his knife into Wylde's body.

The overthrow of the outlaws occupied but a brief time.

"Are the varmints all corraled?" asked Gold Dust Rock, grimly.

"Every man o' them. But who'd 'a' thought that; Red Bivens was one of 'em White Rider gang."

"Nothin' warn't too mean fer him," replied Rock; "reckon ye'll find he warn't the only Driftwood man thar either. Hol the youngster has fainted."

Velvet Hand had indeed lost his senses.

Gold Dust Rock bore him to the open air and laid him down upon the ground.

Then as he loosened the clothing about his throat, a look of surprise overspread his bronze countenance that was unused to showing emotion, and he tenderly replaced the garments.

"It's no more'n I s'pected," he said, and removing his broad-rimmed sombrero he began to fan the pallid brow now beginning to show a return of color.

"Where's Mary—my sister?" cried Mark Redburn, excitedly. "She must be here somewhere."

Now that the captives had been bound the others—a part of them—joined him in his search. But no trace of the missing girl could be found. Redburn was nearly frantic. Well he might be.

Velvet Hand's consciousness was fast returning and in a moment he opened his eyes.

"Where am I—oh, how weak I have been! Where is he—Red Bivens?"

"Whar he will not harm you, younker."

"You saved my life?"

"Mebbe; but we are not square, for I took no risk, while you did the bravest act that ever was done for me. Rock Randel will never forget that favor."

"After the insult I gave you, can you say—"

"Tut, tut! you thought me your foe. So I was. Perhaps I am not now, for I begin to see through the game that has been played."

"Red Bivens wants to see you, Mister Whirlwind. I think the chap is 'bout done for."

Gold Dust Rock turned to find the outlaw dying.

"Ye've beat me!" he muttered, "an' I mought es well own up seein' es how I mus' pass in my checks. I have done everything I could to git possession o' this claim, an' had nigh 'bout succeeded. I cheated old Marlot out 'is one-half an' I hed nigh 'bout got hold o' t'other. Ef ye an' thet chap in velvet hadn't kem, I should hev made out. Now it is over. Don't be hard with the boys for I led them on. I did it to git rid o' my foes."

"Then this lead belongs to Ora Marlot?" asked Gold Dust Rock.

"Yes; all on't."

"But Mark Redburn—"

"He's a liar an' an impostor! If Ora Marlot war livin'—"

"She is!" broke in the Velvet Hand. "*I am Ora Marlot!*"

Her words fell upon wondering listeners.

"I might as well own it," the other went on.

"I was in a desperate situation after you killed poor grandfather, and, friendless, I adopted this disguise that I might the better defend my rights."

"And you have done it nobly!" exclaimed Gold Dust Rock. "Henceforth I am your friend."

"And I," chorused the others to a man.

"I thank you," she replied. "Have you more to say, Mr. Bivens?"

But the voice of the outlaw was forever silent.

"He's gone on his long trail," said Gold Dust Rock. "Boys, won't some of you see that he has a grave? The meanest of us deserve that. While you are doing it, the rest of us will prepare to return to the city."

"But where is Mary?" besought the distracted Redburn.

"You won't find her here," said one of the captives. "She was taken by us, but she went off with one of our chums, Guy Horton, an old

suitor of hers. They've gone to the Golden Chance City."

Mark Redburn at once mounted his horse to leave them.

"Let him go," said Gold Dust Rock. "We cannot get rid of him easier."

Mark Redburn, who had thought by a bold game, thinking that the rightful heirs were dead, to gain possession of at least half of the claim, was never seen in Driftwood again. We would say, however, that he afterward became a respected citizen. Guy Horton, through his wife's (Mary's) influence, lived an honored and happy life. What woman has performed a nobler mission?

The journey to the city was performed without adventure. Our party, as may be imagined, was greeted with rejoicings, and they became the heroes of the hour.

Ora was nearly overjoyed to meet her brother, and he—well, we will draw the curtain on those happy scenes.

The next day was a gala time and Ora was declared the Queen of the Mine. Praises were lavished upon her without stint. And to this day the deeds of Velvet Hand live in story.

She attempted to apologize to Gold Dust Rock, but he would not listen to her confused words.

"I ask no greater privilege than to turn the other cheek," he said. And then he added with a sly wink, "I mistrusted then you were a woman!"

Knowing that she had got to win the favor of the miners by some bold act, and thinking Rock her foe, she had done as she did. She had saved his life, not caring to see even an enemy murdered with so little provocation.

Right here we would say that the road-agents got off with a promise of good behavior—a promise faithfully kept.

We might go on and tell you of Lewis Marlot's rapid recovery of health, of the future prosperity of Driftwood claim that brought to its respected owners great wealth, and that they did not forget their friends who had aided them in adversity.

You can anticipate all this. Ha! there is one little event you might not imagine that we want you should know. You remember Bob Hartley? A fine fellow he was, too. Don't you think he deserved the hand of fair Ora? Whether he did or not, he got it, and her heart, too. We know they have your good wishes.

Si Kettle lived long and prospered at the Golden Sheep, which brought him a goodly fleece.

Sparks and Robbins are beneath our notice.

Gold Dust Rock, when he was no longer needed, left Driftwood and his host of friends there. He promised to return to them some time. We cannot say that he ever did.

THE END.

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